

JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET

CELEBRATION, 2008

An interview with Clément Dirié

Winter for a Year and *Total Eclipse of the Heart* are the novelistic titles of two exhibitions by Jean-Baptiste Bernadet, shown respectively at the Project-Room of the Les Filles du Calvaire gallery, Brussels, and the Xprssns gallery, Hamburg, in winter 2008-2009.

These exhibitions presented a set of recent and older painted canvases and sculptures. This wide range of works was selected to show the variety of Jean-Baptiste Bernadet's approaches to painting. Clement Dirié took the opportunity of these exhibitions to interview the artist, born in 1978 in Paris and resident in Brussels since 2000.

What follows is the transcript of this interview, in which Jean-Baptiste Bernadet discusses his recent works, his ideas on painting and his reflections on what being a painter means to him.

Clement Dirié : When would you say you started painting seriously? How do you view your art school education now?

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet: I've been painting *seriously* since I graduated in 2003. When I was at the Beaux-Arts, I was very sensitive to the reactions of my professors and of my peers. I found criticism hard to accept, and I developed what I describe as a "painterly heroism" that was quite out of place. I wanted to prove that I was a real and absolute painter by over-producing artworks. In retrospect, I realize that my work came close to being performance art. It's only later on that I really felt I was learning something, through discussions with more experienced artists like Xavier Noiret-Thomé or Robert Suermondt.

I did learn in school, however, that art was a lot of work and not just about expressing your feelings.

CD: Has there ever been a point at scrapped everything to start all over again? I mean, is your work linear and harmonious or has it changed dramatically over the years?

JBB: I've always painted, though one can see many major changes in my body of works. I often feel like I'm starting all over again after I take a break. Since very early on I've shared my time between the studio and other activities. I've worked as a scenographer for a contemporary dance company, I've assisted registrars in putting up exhibitions. In consequence, I've had to divide up my time at the studio. At times it can be quite difficult to juggle different projects, but I need to get some air from the studio, so it suits me. My experience with dance taught me a lot about distancing oneself. It seemed necessary to me in this performance art, even though it was quite contrary to what I was doing in painting back then.

CD: Are there any paintings that you are particularly satisfied with ? Do certain works embody big turning points in your practice?

JBB: Of course I have that feeling of satisfaction once in a while, but most of the time, it

doesn't last long, and time proves you wrong. I can leave the studio very happy, and come back the next day only to realize nothing really happened, or worse, I ruined everything I was working on. On the other hand, a painting can seem really good to me, months after I did it. Sometimes, I can't even believe I painted it myself. Usually, it's not a painting I conceived as a turning point in my practice. It happens among the day-to-day production, when I allow myself to ramble. Obviously, I can't repeat that move. What I can do, is try to integrate that move as a new tool when I rediscover it. That's how I find beacons in my work, but it only happens two or three times a year.

CDD: Where would you situate your work in the time-worn debate between abstract and figurative painting?

JBB: I may be mistaken, but I don't understand why this distinction still prevails when talking about painting. To me it's a red herring : what is really at stake in painting and in art in general, lies far from that pseudo issue. That sort of distinction (for instance, the European seventeenth-century debate between color and drawing) leads to mannerism and academism, to an artificial art only concerned with proving a point).

To a certain extent, I'd say that I feel close to the idea of *art concret*, not in the way Kandinsky conceived of it, transforming it into an abstract art which later became a religion, but in the sense of what is concrete, real - meaning neither abstract nor figurative- in a line, a color, a form, a letter.

To put it another way, I feel very distant from a certain trend in contemporary figurative painting, which concerns itself only with reproducing images. It's nothing more than a kind of photography and, moreover, plays upon a pseudo pictorial emotion. People over romanticize that kind of painting, which enables them to avoid discussing what can really be seen in it - most of the time not that much. I don't feel any closer to the decorative abstract trend of today. It turns avant-garde into design.

Between these two extremes, which currently dominate the art market, there are a whole range of positions. It's this range - wide, open and fluctuating - that interests me, and that I feel a part of. Besides, I think I share my views on painting with many other artists who aren't painters. I'm more interested in specific works than in a specific medium and its related practice.

CD: In your recent shows, for instance at the Musée des Beaux-arts de Tourcoing (France, 2005), or at the Chapelle des Calvairiennes in Laval (*Happy End*, France, 2007), you showed paintings inside a global installation. This winter, your shows seem closer to a more traditional conception of painting, even though one can still feel a certain sense of scenography.

JBB: I never stopped making paintings, but, as luck would have it, I ended up showing mostly installations over the last three years. Recently, I've wanted to put more emphasis on the paintings themselves, while still allowing myself to use a more dramatic vocabulary if the place and the circumstances suited it. Though, I consider an exhibition as a creation *per se*, a sort of meta-artwork.

CD: You often use letters, graphic signs and words in your paintings, it's perhaps one of its signature characteristics. What does the language of writing bring to a pictorial work?

JBB: An address. I don't have a special interest in letters as graphic signs. I'm interested by

language and speech. All of my paintings are addressed *to somebody*. I've struggled to find a way of reaching that virtual viewer, to clarify my message to him. Words are one of my means of doing so.

What actual viewers see in my work is a three way relationship: between me and the painting; between the painting and the viewer; between me and the viewer. I am merged with my painting, and the viewer merges with its addressee. But these roles are fluctuating, it's all about how you position yourself. According to the paintings, I'm more or less sincere, more or less autobiographical, and those who see my paintings perceive them more or less for themselves or for somebody else.

CD: Does using language help you to avoid being too literal, to find the detachment you mentioned earlier?

JBB: Not necessarily nowadays, but I started using words in my painting in order to find a three-way dialogue, as a sort of *mise-en-scène*. It does allow me to avoid being too literal, which is always a risk with the kind of, shall we say, "expressive" painting I practice.

CD: Do you consider painting as a diary or a media?

JBB: I would say my painting is part of what a French literary theorist called autofiction, that is to say fictionalized autobiography. From that perspective, my painting is both a diary *and* a media. May I note that I style myself more in the vein of Marcel Proust than Christine Angot !

CD: Your work demonstrates a sort of degraded painting process, with its shading backgrounds and streaked writings. Are you afraid of sleek appearances and slick finishes?

JBB: My work is shifting and hectic. It's the result of hesitations and over-lappings. It is part of the story I'm trying to tell, it articulates a certain state like words do. I shall say nonetheless that this slapdash, worn out appearance is counterbalanced by a deliberate consideration of how to make the work more attractive: striking colors, the elegance of some lines, the composition...

CD: In your three shows this winter, the artworks combine, as they often do, different ways of using texts (slogan, personal expression, emotional address). One artwork though, *Century 21*, stands out because it seems different from the others.

JBB: The words and the phrases I use in my paintings can be read simultaneously as personal narratives, advertising slogans and/or lyrics from a famous song. This ambivalence allows me to keep free of the literal meaning of words, from the "expression of the self", and last but not least from a simple denunciation of the pervasiveness of advertising. Thanks to this ambivalence, I can be ironic about political criticism and romantic expression at the same time.

As for *Century 21*, it's both a pun and a send-up. This artwork takes a sharp, black, aggressive form, but it can be used as a shelter if hung high enough, with "21^{ème} siècle" (21st century) written on it. Even the universal – that is to say what everyone can identify with, the time we live in, the hopes we share for the future - can become a logo and a material for advertising, in this case for an international real estate agency. Besides, it is a very retro logo from the 20th century, it sounds like a would-be futuristic sci-fi name, like the *Video 2000 VCR*. Those names became obsolete even before the future they anticipated actually happened. It's

symptomatic of our era: People seek to go faster and further, disconnecting themselves from reality and the passing of time. I don't make a lot of artworks like this one, out of found objects, but I'm happy with this *Century 21* because it allows multiple perspectives and readings.

CD: Let's talk about the sculptures and the objects you shown for the Ariane de Rothschild Art Prize. The sculptures have a very explosive aspect, they seem to explore the 360° possibilities of that medium. As for the objects you presented, on the other hand, they return to reality and figurative representation by privileging collage and the male body. How do you consider them in relation to the rest of your work?

JBB: These sculptures have an effect on the space of an exhibition, they become like a central node. They're fragmented and many-sided, but also very compact and dense, a bit like mini big-bangs. They provide the surrounding artworks with a distinctive dimension and they provide the possibility of different readings because they create a dialogue with the paintings hung on the walls around them.

The use of collages and the incorporation of printed pictures also enriches the outlook on the paintings. It makes more manifest the dimension of collage in my work. In many respects, these inserted pictures play the same role as words in my paintings: "cliché" *and* quotation, mundane advertisements *and* object of intimate desire, empty signs *and* antique ideal.

CD: Do you take painting seriously? Many of your works seem to be playing with tradition and the seriousness of traditional painting, and with the tradition of *Bad painting* as well.

JBB: I chose to paint because I love painting and painters. I wanted to be Claude Monet, Nicolas de Staël, Pierre Soulages... I guess what I was looking for in painting was precisely seriousness in its worst sense: heroism, pathos, the mystique of gesture and inspiration... it took time to get rid of all that. And I'm not even done yet. To me, there was only one way of keeping on working, of refusing self-indulgence, without becoming cynical: I had to damage the surface of my painting, to accept accidents, to make barriers with words, to set calculation and loss against each other at the very same place, at the very same time.

CD: Your sculptures are generally monochrome, black, and they often explore the theme of vanity. Your current painting is quite dark, quite macabre. Do you consider melancholy as a triggering factor in creation?

JBB: We live in a tough, unfair, cynical world and our condition is a painful one. It's hard for me to be cheerful and hopeful. My work manifests this disillusion, this feeling of loss and anxiety. But to create is also to pretend that nothing is wrong, it's also a celebration.

Clément Dirié is an art critic, independant curator, and editor at JRP Ringier. He lives in Paris. This interview was realized by e-mail during november 2008, and transcribed by Clément Dirié for Semaines Magazine (France) who published it in January 2009.

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