

## WORDS IN JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET'S PAINTING

BY DEVRIM BAYAR, 2006

In "Words in painting," Michel Butor describes the various forms and functions of the written word in Western painting from the Middle Ages to our days and highlights the fact that the aesthetic experience of images is never exclusively visual. Whether they remain outside of the pictorial field, such as titles, legends and other comments, or whether they are inscribed within the representation, such as the famous newspaper clippings stuck on Braque and Picasso's canvases, or the painted denominations of Magritte or a signature, words, demonstrates Butor, inevitably alters our view.

If the presence of words in painting is thus nothing new, Western culture – in contrast with non-Western societies – has long established a strict separation between the two fields. The question of the discursive vocation of artistic images, or the «ut pictura poesis» theory, according to Horace's formula, has indeed shaken the whole of the history of Western art, from the Antiquity to the contemporary era. As early as the fifth century B.C., Simonide de Céos defined painting as silent poetry and poetry as vocal painting. This idea of the parallelism between painting and poetry strongly re-appeared during the Renaissance, within the framework of the promotion of painting in the hierarchy of arts: the relationship between the two disciplines was used as the principal argument for the promotion of painting from the status of "mechanical" arts to that of "liberal" arts. The comparison was then radicalized by classical authors of the seventeenth century, in France and Great Britain in particular, who preached the clear superiority of the literary model, for the pictorial practice as well as for the interpretation of images.

Against the academic separation of arts, romantic artists initiated a search for "correspondences", which the Baudelairian poem of the same name is one of the best known examples. A century later, the relationship between visual arts and the language arts has expanded as never before: from cubism and futurism, to conceptual art and Figuration Libre, text and image cohabit the same space in which they are superimposed, combined... Now linguistic substance pervades the plastic activity to the point of sometimes becoming its place. The use of words consists in exploring not only the formal potentials of the letter but also the significant value of the text. Works are therefore visible and readable, at the same time form and meaning, object and discourse.

Trained as a painter, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet (born in Paris in 1978 - living and working in Brussels since 2000) initially worked at the fringe of abstraction, before introducing, in 2004, his first words in painting with the disillusioned sentence "I have lost my illusions". Drawing from the consciousness of loss, an extraordinary energy and creativity, this work inaugurates an extremely fertile series of paintings of words. A pivotal painting, *I have lost my illusions* announces the prominent characteristics of Jean-Baptiste Bernadet's recent work.

From the start, the choice of the English language raises doubts regarding the author's sincerity. A ready-made sentence, the meaning of *I have lost my illusions* oscillates between a dramatic confidence and the lines of a soap opera. This ambiguity between, the touching

authenticity of self-reflection, and the contempt for the commonplaces of communication and self-construction at the dawn of the twenty-first century, pervades the whole series of words paintings. Likewise, the interpretation of *Yeah* hesitates between a spontaneous acclamation and the afflicting rallying cry of the "cool" generation; while, *I want to know why* balances between the search for a true understanding and the lyric of a pop song.

Many of the artist's sentences are either conjugated in the first person - in addition to the two paintings previously described, one can note *I superabound (but I still have nothing to do)*, *I have lost* or even *I can't see myself in your eyes* - or refer to the first person, such as works entitled *Viens* ("Come" in English), *Every moment is mine*, *Levitate me* and *Never leave me*. This importance of the subject indicates the artist's "self-reflection" (Jean-Baptist Bernadet speaks openly about the introspective character of his painting) while stigmatizing an individualistic society in which the narcissistic leitmotiv is "me, myself and I".

In addition, the claim of "I" is a characteristic theme of romanticism, other traits of which can be recognized in the series of words paintings. For instance, the sublime vision of nature and the universe, in which the romantic character finds a new field of expression for the torments of his heart - let us remember the renowned romantic painter, German Caspar David Friedrich, who depicted in 1817 his *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* as a lonesome figure facing the infinite spectacle of nature, a celestial beyond that the man, anchored on his rock, cannot exceed - is now manifested in large plains which spread under an immense sky blazing with colors or under a starlight night in the depth of which the artist places the call for help: S.O.S. In addition to disillusioned formulas, dark skies and black visions, there is a title which summarizes the romantic and self-contemptuous attitude of the young painter: *Héroïque solitude*.

Heroism, large plains and English language dissolve any doubt about Jean-Baptist Bernadet's attachment to American painting, of which *I want muscles* is the painted homage. His words paintings recall in particular the work of Cy Twombly, for whom painting, writing and drawing are equivalent, and especially that of Ed Ruscha, who has since the Sixties, retraced the new emblems of American life - from Hollywood signs to stylized gas stations - while adopting language as the very subject of his work. If Jean-Baptist Bernadet explores various styles of writing in the manner of the latter, his prove definitely less sleek than Ed Ruscha's typographies. The French artist's graphic style is more immediate and expressive, like the background on which words appear. Visible erasures, run-outs, garish colors, de-centered compositions or recycling of abandoned works which transparently appear under new creations, Jean-Baptist Bernadet's painting expresses an extreme intensity, which I shall name, according to the artist's own (painted) word of, "hhardor".

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