

*If There is a Chance*

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet – between expenditure and fiction

Raphael Pirenne

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Before his solo shows at Saks (Geneva) and Renwick (New York) in November 2011 and Maes & Matthys (Antwerp) in May 2012, the French-born Bruxelles-based painter Jean-Baptiste Bernadet spent several months working on the other side of the Atlantic. Artist in residence at the prestigious Chinati Foundation, created by Donald Judd in Marfa, Texas, and then in Brooklyn at APT studios, this stay led to two exhibitions, one in Marfa and the second with Benoît Platéus at New York's Karma gallery.

The paintings Bernadet exposed continued the exploration of a methodology of “differentiation” characteristic of his work, with each canvas reflecting on painting through a singular entry point: a burst of evanescent colors on the plainer surface, his birth year and the current year in sifted metallic residue, an advertisement for diamonds partially obliterated with spray paint, black and white paint hastily applied and removed, etc. Not without a certain degree of postmodern irony and self-reflection, Bernadet appropriates the codes that make up the history of painting, in both its relationship with the image and the painterly gesture, with some canvases oscillating between evocations of 1960's Cy Twombly and the Frank Stella of the *black paintings*.

This differential logic helps to define Bernadet's work, each painting attempting to appropriate and incorporate this history. The interest of his way of working is precisely that: an appropriate that doesn't aim at the simple reproduction of a gesture, image, or code, but rather at their subjective rendering, implying a transformative process.

However, if painting continues to exist, it's not just through an eternal affirmation of its conditional dimension. Since the “crisis of painting” and the medium's subsequent subjection to numerous postmodern critiques, it has constantly rebounded, repositioning itself, and inevitably posing the question of the possibility or obsolescence of attempts at definition. Several generations of artists, from Raoul De Keyzer to Josh Smith, through Martin Kippenberger and Christopher Wool, have exploited a strategic circumnavigation of the pictorial mode, a sort of self-consciously melancholy position, in the painted object, refuting and resisting definition. Bernadet takes this logic and applies it according to a dual economy.

The first deals with “expenditure” in the sense Georges Bataille employs the term <sup>1</sup>. The stylistic explosion that characterizes the artist's work, the alternate use of effects generated through brushwork, incompleteness, rapidity of execution

and the contrasting sense of multiple revisions, exercises in erasure (coming out of what Raphael Rubinstein calls “provisional painting”)<sup>2</sup>, participates in a logic of “expenditure” where production has no other use or function than procuring pleasure from, sometimes through removal of, the paint; the various marks and layers, in some works, seeming to contradict themselves.

The second aspect of this economy concerns a question no less central to the recent history of painting – that of narrative and fiction. Following the crises of grand modernist narratives (Lyotard), Bernadet’s paintings seem to strive, through abstraction, to reconsider narrative formulations. The artist has said, “All my paintings are addressed to someone.” This mode of addressing, which a few years ago meant a greater place given to language in the work, with written phrases suggesting a deliberately, occasionally disillusioned, pop affinity (*Help the Blind, What happens here stays here*, etc.), has recently been recast. Although text is still present, in titles or elsewhere (notably in Marfa works like *Build High*, text written on a white canvas, ~~*Cavalry*~~ *Cavalry*, or the printed paper work *Per Aspera ad Astra*), it’s the painterly gesture that carries and advances a narrative (that of its production and the multiple tensions involved in construction of a painting) but also the installation of the canvases in a given space that suggests a kind of fictionalization of his work<sup>3</sup>. For the show at Karma, stylistic, gestural, and material incoherencies presented themselves to the spectator as a narrative, broken rather than chronological, recounting the painter’s process. Bernadet called his New York show *If There is a Chance*, like an invitation to a hypothetical, possibly utopian (endlessly playing itself out, repositioning itself), discovery of the future history of his work.

(1) Georges Bataille, "Notions of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess*, University of Minn., 1985 (published in French in 1933).

(2) See Raphaël Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting", in *Art in America*, April 2009.

(3) About installation in painting, see David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself", in *October* n°130, autumn 2009, pp. 125-134.