

JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET

**POSTMODERN MYTHOLOGIES, 2006**

by Tristan Trémeau

Living in Brussels since 2000, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet (1978, Paris) continues a pictorial work staging a question which has tormented art since the beginning of modernity: that of authenticity.

Authenticity is a delicate question. If the avant-garde was clearly engaged for truth (of painting, of the material, of the subject, of history...) against kitsch (pictorial, material, historical inauthenticity...), postmodernism has been less decided since Pop Art. Early 70s, the inevitable commercial reification and the loss of the unicity of artworks, which would devalue the aspiration to the authenticity of works of art and historical truth, led to the emergence of two porous attitudes supported by the increasing fringing between art and the mass culture industry (MCI): melancholy and/or cynicism (1). Warhol's seminal work, attitude and economy influenced appropriationists (Levine, Longo) and simulationists (Halley, Steinbach, Koons), then on an impoverished theoretical and plastic mode, the comfortable design environments, which are eventually participative and based on the samplings of forms, colors and sounds borrowed from a conventional repertory of modernism and the MCI (Rehberger, Dafflon, Calais).

Confronted with this last artistic trend which illustrates the bourgeois aspirations of re-enchantment (2), Bernadet's works and exhibition devices seem un-designed (although they are well designed) counterpoints to the use of the same repertory of forms, colors and modernist compositions. This was manifest in the installations of paintings presented at the museum of Tourcoing in the summer of 2005. The increasingly large space taken by words in his recent paintings promotes indeed their combination. A wooden structure thus parodies a panel of public display by associating paintings inspired by Stella in the 60's with slogans: *Low budget, Tout doit disparaître* (« Everything must go ») and *No no no*. What is staged or allegedly discounted is as much what historically marked the bond between modernism and Pop (Stella) as the conscience of a devaluation of the modernist criterion of authenticity which this bond could generate.

Irony plays a major role in these installations, with regards to the history and the context of contemporary art (cf the installation of seven paintings entitled *Intelligent Design* in Tourcoing), but also because for Bernadet it is a means of distancing himself with what he calls his "romanticism". In fact, his preliminary aspirations to painting manifested his taste for abstract landscape which one knows, with regards to the turn taken by Brandl's work, that it always risks being kitsch. From now on, Bernadet's landscapes or skies are tinted with irony (*I want muscles, S.O.S*). A typically postmodern double bind is at play here: the desire of an authentic pictorial experience is tuned in to the conscience of its possible kitsch pitfall and with the a-priori rejection of any adventurous impulse orchestrated by the technical discourse of art history since forty years. *L'aventure* (« The adventure »), a painting bearing the traces of the impossible or an aspiration turned humble (like Twombly) would be its exhibition; By quoting them, Bernadet clearly revisits postmodern myths, whose least is not the melancholic

and critical conscience of the "romantic vanity" of the avant-gardes in their aspirations to authentic experience, historical truth and the transformation of the world: *I've lost my illusions*. At the same time, the ironic use of these sentences does not encumber the sentimentality which feeds Bernadet's works. He draws them from rock'n'roll lyrics, a music which one knows since Dan Graham that after having been the link to the avant-garde for artists of the 70's (for its supposed purity) this genre is the model of authentic unauthenticity (2). In fact, what is perhaps at play in Bernadet's work is to be sought on the side of the triple heritage of Rauschenberg, Kippenberger and Wool, between appropriation, proliferation, expenditure, critical conscience, ironic distance and masquerade.

1 As Hal Foster recalls in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996)

2 The bourgeois ideology has been subjected to an "ex-nomination" since a long time (Barthes, "Le mythe, aujourd'hui", in *Mythologies*, 1957). One consequence is the loss of this nomination, supported by the myth of the end of the history. The middle-class does not want any history and needs this myth to affirm the perennality of its ideology "l'ordre du monde sera suffisant ou ineffable, il ne sera jamais signifiant. L'idée première d'un monde perfectible, mobile, produira l'image renversée d'une humanité immuable, définie par une identité relativement recommencée". Le discours du "rénchantment" n'est dès lors qu'un moyen de propagande pour que la majorité adhère à la "clarté heureuse" d'un "monde étalé dans l'évidence" (Barthes).

3 Dan Graham, *Rock my religion*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993)

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