

About a Pile of Plates
Essay by Mathieu Buard

The world Pascal perceived identically, from the smallest mite to the farthest sun, repeats itself between opposing infinities, but the incessantly repeated circles of their regular forms don't fit together neatly. They are punctuated by reflected symmetries, which is to say minutely calculated disymmetries, the development, expansion, and explosion, if you will, of the organization of the universe.

— Roger Caillois, *La dissymétrie*

Ceramics are risky. The risk of a firing that shatters, a blinding heat, other-worldly heat that, inside the kiln, achieves an alchemy of elements and colours under no supervisory eye, with no control tower to oversee the enamel's flow over the baked material's surface. Silica melts, oxides develop, the hardening form dons an dissymmetric cosmetic, and atmospheric chaos strikes in this blind time.

The plate, a ceramic support comprised of slopes, embankments and edges, is the ideal terrain for the rise and fall of that aqueous liquid that is enamel. The flat object, sandwiched between the micro and macroscopic, is its own solar system, whose exterior forms distribute, unopposed, a range of circumvolutions, a centrifugal depth, the abscissas and orders of an optical landscape, a prismatic quality, in short, a setting with all the oddity of a rainbow. The arrangement, however, foils the primordial fear of the ancient world, that a flat disc would end in an abyss. Constituting itself as a full subject with rough concaves, the plate is a medium — of the series, the multiple.

Atmospheric disturbances; fade-ins/fade-outs.

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet, in the modernist tradition, attacks ceramics through painting. The application of enamel colours onto the plate and the subsequent renegotiation of the humid composition and colours through firing, clearly explores the history of the decorative, the value assigned to chinoiserie and the very appearance of pictorial motifs. More than anything, however, it evokes the temptation to exhaustion of the series, caught in the excitement of this indomitable matter and of the gestures that accompany and fix it via the act of painting. It evokes, likewise, the phantasmagoria that mysteriously organizes and deploys the enamel in thin layers.

Fired, re-fired, covered with colours, saturated, the enamelled object escapes, refuses, flees, self-destructs. The painter's game is a quest to catch something in a state of equilibrium, to freeze the transitory events and furtive dreams of matter, it is a struggle to fix the coloured trajectories of these translucent aerolites. The painter-enameller can, if not always to exhaust the ceramic, at least to have nothing left to cover. But that's when the capricious enamel squeals and explodes. And then, re-fire the fragments, superposing the shards and glazes. Leave the planar to go toward volume, and back into the oven again. Fade-ins and fade-outs, the series continues.

One of the definitions of the word ‘atmosphere’ in the Littré reads: ‘rare and transparent fluid, compressible and elastic’. Strangely familiar, indeed almost a mirror images, of the qualities we naturally attribute to enamel. Liquid permanence, unfailingly linked to a paradoxically transparent colour, both the atmosphere and enamel are confounded with and bound to their support: the landscape and ceramic clay are both receptacles where this innately vague matter takes hold.

Like his paintings, whose supposedly mechanical gestures are free of subjective or affective expression, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet gets to the essence of his pictorial medium through the mystery of prismatic enamel and the black box, the oven silently dissolving silica and oxide. The result of the painter’s gesture is differed, the surprise is like a photographic quasi-revelation, a Polaroid that at the end the firing diverts and renders indifferent the question of simple expressivity. The absence of an explicit or overly masterly touch maintains the cosmic and cosmetic relationship between the form and the melting enamel; it becomes the object and the obsession to bake, glaze and bake again. And to do so until the chimerical equilibrium of heterogeneous currents, the optical, settles and the plate finds its depth. The painter’s gesture is to let this void, this inferno, and this atmospheric tumult emerge. In short, a celestial chaos that reconnects with the spontaneous, original form. The painter evokes the notion of ‘celestography’, which August Strindberg coined to describe photographic impressions of the moon, stars and their glow. Are the plates painted at Moly-Sabata a fictional reflection of nights on the Rhône, the break of day, variation of light in the house? The fugitive qualities of the crystallized surface are inscribed, noted by the range of coloured enamel glazes, chemical solutions through which the plate becomes a pictorial platform for an astromancian practice. Jean-Baptiste Bernadet: tracker of water, aberrations and balmy chromatics.

The collection is excited by its own variations. Constituted, the pile of plates composes an archipelago, an almanac, an accumulation of viewpoints with no narrative. Out of the painter’s gesture develop a series of liquid landscapes, moving waters that, when concerned with nocturnal qualities, become a screen for diffuse constellations and flashes of darkness. The multiplicity of flat discs then pass ceaselessly from the ground to the heavens, from a liquid and horizontal contingency to a nebulous and vertical evaporation. The plate takes on the allure of a telluric hollow, the harsh soil of the earth or a lake, like the solid but improbable base of a cosmos. From solid to gas, liquid to vapour: the collection proliferates from plain to plain. Jean-Baptiste Bernadet paints atmospheric dissymmetry, a climatic emptying-out that stretches all the way to the cancellation of individual plates in the series, the loss of the object in the motif of a cloud, a lake, a night.

As a result of bursts of chemical light, nothing is visible; the summer storm isn’t enough.

‘One unfortunate consequence of the Hubble Effect is that it is virtually impossible to photograph anything transformed by it. As any reader of scientific journals knows, glassware is extremely difficult to reproduce, and even blocks of the highest screen on the best quality art papers — let alone the coarse blocks used on newsprint — have failed to reproduce the brilliant multi-faceted lattices of the Hubble Effect, with their myriads of interior prisms, as anything more than a vague blur like half-melted snow’.

— J.G. Ballard, *The Illuminated Man*

In the end, the plate-object is congested: the filtered colour and enamel prisms fix a transitory temporality, a frozen enigma of suspended time, onto the flat ceramic. Between spacement and

detachment, the enamel imperturbably exhibits its insides — hazy, creamy, thick — though without ever allow us to touch its depth. A window through which the spectator observes ‘crystallized’ surfaces, sombre and transparent, with impatient delectation. The visitor would like to go beyond these restrictions, to transgress the barrier and grasp the vision contained in the interstice between the depth of the object and the brilliance of its surface, to satisfy a tactile desire. But that’s withheld, slyly.

The pile then exacerbates the visible spectrum that, in the wake of the enamel onslaught, entices but frustrates the viewer. The heaping superposition of plates that are stacked as much as arranged only leaves visible the edges: a compiled cosmos, a folded-up map of this pictorial constellation.

Beyond questions concerning the decorative, the exotic apparatuses of the bourgeois interior, or the colour vernacular, the motifs inscribed on the plates puts any possibility of using them beyond the pale. The iron oxide adorning the bottom of the plate, sombre or light, disturbs its functionality. The enamelled ceramic, understood through these two states — voluntary spacing and contrast — keeps at a distance the surveying eye as much as the probing hand. Resolutely unusable, the enamel colours are unalterable by provocation, by an obsolete motif.

The enamel poses a question to representation, Bernadet’s pictorial touch pushes Impressionist optics a step farther back: an almost digital vibration, comprised of crystals and sticks and akin in every way to the definition of a digital image, is paradoxically exacerbated by the real, tangible and fatally analogue physical state of the coloured enamel. The plate, a window behind which the captive air is inaccessible, conveys the disposition of the artist’s eye at the moment of painting. As a representational support, ceramic is a chimera, the neat figure of an elsewhere that has disappeared beneath a screen of oxide glazes. The blur, the chromatic resolution, the depth of field and the strata reactivate the series, and the invitation to engage with it. With their haptic qualities, scopic apnoeas, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet’s plates open a field of multiple poetic dimension and its (serial) detachment.

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