

**Jean-Baptiste Bernadet**

***The Songs of The Sky***

William Shearburn Gallery and Parapet / Real Humans, St. Louis, Missouri

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Color isn't static in Jean-Baptiste Bernadet's paintings – it vibrates and unfolds like an event. Particles of color populate the canvas and other substrates alike to form a flow of light and energy that channels bits and pieces of pictorial matter gleaned with nonchalance from Vuillard, Gerstl or Sérusier to name but a few. The complex visual surfaces he creates tend to defy reproducibility. His paintings aren't just optically challenging, they seem to already be re-presenting the reproductions of something, even though that thing could also be the painting itself, showing us its precarious coming into existence in a state of perpetual doing and undoing.

Bernadet's *Fugues* notably thrive on the paradoxical kind of lyrical distortion that occurs through the quasi-mechanical rendering process they entail. Various types of indexicality coexist in his abstractions, thereby making it unclear if things began with the sky itself, the snapshot of a mediterranean sunset, the distant memory of american skies, Proust's description of crimson and golden clouds as "indomitable warriors" when he was a young student, or just the crumpled color photocopy of a Monet painting. The artist isn't merely blurring the boundaries between abstraction and figuration, he is playing a flirtatious game with the increasingly elusive distinction between what constitutes an impression, an expression and a transcription. In other words, his *Fugues* deal with the notion of equivalence.

This notion of equivalence is famously associated with a series of photographs of clouds that kept Alfred Stieglitz busy from 1922 until the early thirties. Although Stieglitz wrote down eight reasons that potentially motivated his endeavor, including his attempt to emulate music, interpreters were quick to focus on the most simple and reductive explanation. "A photograph of the sky might be a container, so to speak, of the photographer's essence" and function as "equivalents of [his] most profound life experience."<sup>1</sup>

There is a subtle irony in Bernadet's cooption of the earlier title that Stieglitz gave to this series. For Bernadet to invoke the *Songs of The Sky* is to queer late modernism's romantic darkness and introduce a productive ambivalence as to what self-expression means for a painter or a photographer trading in abstraction today. Here, there is no grand statement regarding the historically complicated relationship between painting and photography. Instead, the two are given enough space to maintain a mutually advantageous relationship like friends with benefits. Correspondingly, Bernadet is not trying to give us a portal to his soul, nor is he fulfilling the avant-garde agenda of painting like a machine. If postproduction could mean something to a painter, the artist seems to be giving us the *after effect* of things as opposed to the typically impressionist *effect of rain* or *effect of snow*. The way in which he democratically allocates the intensity of perception in his work shows us a way to consider painting as a fascinatingly unstable mediating tool – another idea of painting as a medium.

- Émile Rubino

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<sup>1</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Sky Pictures of Alfred Stieglitz*, MoMA, Autumn 1995, No 20 (Autumn 1995)