

Traite et Lumière

Ode Bertrand has been a painter for almost forty years, having previously devoted herself to dance. She chose geometric abstraction from the start, without ever going through a figuration stage or trying out other styles. She is also the niece of Aurelie Nemours, who encouraged, advised, and inspired her and whose life she watched for thirty-five years by helping her every day until her death in 2005. Ode Bertrand therefore has a quite singular position: partly pupil, partly disciple, she is a follower of the same rigour for cleanness of form and precision of execution but swiftly adopted her own language - a limited number of elements that play on strong contrasts - and her own expression, at once restrained yet emphatically rhythmical.

Ode Bertrand's abstraction stands out through its radicality without resorting to systems and justifications, as Concrete painters do, for example. She merely employs a grid to elaborate her compositions and asserts a spiritual content in her creation. The series of paintings entitled Vertical, painted in 1998-99, is exemplary of her approach: Vertical VI is exclusively composed of thin black vertical lines of slightly differing lengths, painted with extreme precision on a solid white background. Arranged in two tiered groups in a high format measuring one metre by fifty centimetres, the lines that form the upper part are shorter than those that form the lower group.

While the image stands out through the strength of its structure and the contrast between black and white, the rhythm it emits turns out to be very complex. Firstly, horizontally: the succession of black lines and white spaces of equal width is disrupted by the uneven ends, with the separation between the two groups visually translating into a veritable split; secondly, vertically: the lines in the two groups are off kilter thus do not coincide, again engendering visual disruption.

Beneath this apparent simplicity we grasp the full measure of Ode Bertrand's work, based on subtle interactions and skilful balance - to the benefit of rhythm. Expressing an order in which chaos remains present.

PURE RHYTHM, SOMETIMES THE SKY

Anne Tronche - You had your initiation into painting at the studio of one of the great Concrete artists, Aurelie Nemours, with whom you forged an exceptionally strong bond. Did you choose geometric forms as a vocabulary from the start, or has your painting known different stylistic episodes?

Ode Bertrand - I knew right away that I was interested in lines and rhythm. In saying that I remove the subject, in the traditional sense of the term, from my preoccupations.

Unlike some Concrete artists, I didn't have a figurative experience that gradually grew radical, turning into total abstraction. I chose total abstraction from the start.

A.T. - You started out in dance, and Concrete art has known periods when artists tried to find a junction with music. Don't you think your interest in rhythm has been a way of finding this junction with dance?

O.B. - Rhythm, form and the body are all in dance.

The experience I gleaned from dancing has certainly been echoed in the space of the canvas. I didn't decide it or want it, but this appeal for rhythm that I felt deep inside me as soon as I created my first pictorial compositions must have already found a form of statement in dance.

A.T. - The vocabulary of so-called "cold" forms is relatively limited. Be it based on oblique or vertical lines, rectangles, squares or circular forms, it always refuses anything that close to description or imitation. So many movements have been founded since 1930, so many theorisations and revolutionary gestures: how can an artist of today imagine building their own singular space?

O.B. - I think you really mustn't ask yourself that question. You could say that everything has already been said, painted and written. If the first question that an artist asks themselves is about whether it is possible to be original or not, I think they lose all heart before starting anything.

The main thing is the "doing", which is to say the action that involves putting yourself in front of a blank paper and letting the desire for a form or a composition be expressed. I would even say that if your writing crosses over or approaches that of an author from another generation, it's very good. It means that you've followed a research angle that has a point, that poses a veritable pictorial problematic. You realise at the end that the result is actually very different, because the sensitivities and the formal solutions are different. Take Aurelie Nemours' work on the square: she came up with highly original variations and consequences from it. If you compare her research on the square to Josef Albers' research on this single theme, you can measure the distances between the two artists. They grasped this simple figure - the square - but didn't look for exactly the same thing; their chromatic scales were also very different. When you choose painting, the desire to elaborate a space is so great it overrides all questions of singularity or originality. The important thing is to see your project through to the end.

A.T. - At one of your exhibitions at the Cour Carrée gallery I discovered a number of your older paintings, which seemed less appeased than your

current work. They displayed the marks of a certain violence, one / would almost term "bodily". Does this terminology shock you? Can one imagine the body finding a form of expression through this vocabulary of formal measure and rigour?

O.B. - I don't know. Your question interests me because Aurelie Nemours also noticed this violence, and sometimes considered it aggressive. I don't know what comment to make on the situation. I am my first viewer, and myself am sometimes astonished by the display of certain rhythms or the harshness of certain lines. Painting takes me to places I hadn't chosen to go to.

A.T. - It's very curious you should say that, because your writing is the translation of a very mastered vocabulary of signs and colours, and at the same time you imply that painting sometimes imposes its laws. Isn't that contradictory?

O.B. - No doubt. But I work with a grid, you know, because I need a basis to create a kind of rule of play before the lines appear. I join the dots in this grid together and make geometric shapes appear. The grid is drawn exclusively on the edges of the painting, it can be very loose or very tight.

But sometimes I let the unexpected appear when I'm in mid-painting: blanks that interrupt the lines, the arrival of a colour creating an imbalance in the distribution of forms. If violent rhythms sometimes crop up while I'm painting, it's because I'm a long way from the systematism some artists have used, like the Swiss Concrete artists. I start by constituting an order in my paintings, but it rapidly invokes what I call "chaos", meaning an event that alters its pure equilibrium. This movement between two states, which can seem contradictory or complementary, depending, gives the forms - the lines - the possibility to move towards energy. It is the tension between these two almost competing states that interests me.

A.T. - Certain artists, like yourself or François Morellet, for example, have given themselves a rule to follow and have methodically and systematically applied it in order to crush any drive for subjectivity or intuition. In these cases the process they chose is most often revealed in the titles of the works. Do the titles fill this role in your works?

O.B. - Not at all. The series I devoted to the idea of the pyramid, and what I call "virtual volumes", is called Tourah, which is the name that was given to the place where the Egyptians went to get their stones. In another series, characterised by marbled effects, I chose the generic title Clynamen, the moment that precedes the formation of matter, for it struck me that this word perfectly evoked an active, dynamic disorder that announces order. In the recent paintings, where reserves of white introduce a feeling of light, I opted

for Ahura, the goddess of light in pre-Islamic Persia. I try to find analogies between the thought that led to elaborating a painting and an event that sends out a signal to me through history and the cultures that preceded us.

A.T. - You have just used the term "volume", and even "virtual volume", which is curious, given that your painting asserts planes and never suggests any depth.

O.B. - I made a series of paintings where the form made a volume appear via the interplay between colours.

This perception came from certain optical rules that create phenomena of spatial illusion. In this series I thought about my forms in terms of volumes, which led me to move towards this uncertain realm of "plastic" suggestions.

A.T. - What does failure mean to you in painting?

O.B. — A situation that can turn out to be very positive.

A painting that doesn't manage to fit itself into the framework of a project as you'd hoped breeds desire for the next painting. I've noticed that by analysing what is wrong with the composition and learning from it for the following painting, I've often opened up a pathway to a new series of works that would approach a spatial or formal question I hadn't previously thought about.

A.T. - Do you work in series?

O.B. - I have families of works. The work done on one painting forcibly generates the next painting. The variations that occur between one composition and the next reveal the full scope of the rule, open up possibilities that can be perceived as continuities, sometimes as breaks. When I feel the signs of a certain lassitude hitting me, when I see that the painting to come has little chance of surprising my gaze, I know the series is finished.

A.T. - You have often used the clear opposition between black and white, but rarely oppositions between primary colours. What is your relationship to colour?

O.B. - I can't abide pure colour. In fact, I like lines because there's no material, I prefer rhythm to form and I only like colour in dark shades that recall black, or extremely pale tones, tempted by white.

A.T. - When you create an interplay between the very dark tones of two different colours, or oppose two shades that are so similar and so light you can barely spot the differences between them, you push the composition to

the limits of perceptibility.

O.B. - I like the composition to reveal itself at the end of a lengthy observation. My painting is the contrary of the "in your face" aesthetic, it harnesses an uncertain state that I call the "unsaid". The gaze that settles on my canvases has to look for their constituting elements, deepen its acquaintance with the colours proposed. I ask the viewer to spend time. I do indeed push the painting to a certain limit. In that case, the linear I'm so fond of becomes the fine dividing line between two shades that brush against each other but discreetly set themselves apart.

A.T. - Do you paint freehand, following the paths paved by the brush, or do you seek to eliminate the signs left by the hand?

O.B. - I want each stroke to be as clean as possible; in fact, I treat them with a drawing pen. Likewise for colour; I don't like material effects, so I work with precise layers, not covering one colour with another. There is great rigour in my process of execution.

AI tried to do worse the mathematical Approach in Art, Max Bill tried to analyse the mysteries of science, such as parallels that intersect to infinity or the notions of multiple spaces. Are you interested in this relationship between art and science, does it help you to define your pictorial space, or do you see the canvas as a closed space, a plane where only the properties specific to the tension of line and colour are developed?

O.B. - Composing forms and colours as echoes of a scientific approach touches on a problematic that is totally alien to me, but this doesn't necessarily mean that the pictorial space isn't linked to something else. For me, every painting should talk of the sky.

A.T. - What do you mean by that? The sky as a place of divine reflection, or the sky as the cosmos, crossed by energies that govern us all, from the infinitely small to the planets?

O.B. - I have faith. Consequently, for me the sky is inhabited. Inhabited by the mysteries of the origins, but also by the energies you just mentioned, evoking suspended bodies, wandering phenomena. In placing my paintings close to this feeling, I ask them to be a presence, not the simple resolution of a visual problem. For me, the deflagration of black in white contains the hope of this presence.

A.T. - The "deflagration" you say: that's a violent formulation. So black in white makes something explode?

O.B. - The black body must animate the white. A white that cannot be a void however, one which is sub-stance, in my opinion, at least.

A.T. - Concrete art has found particularly favourable application areas in the fields of architecture and design. Are you interested in questions that give the artist a moral and social responsibility to requalify the space in which we live and think?

O.B. - As you know, I have chosen solitude, contemplation and silence - states that are incompatible with being an artist in society, with thinking about the forms of our habitat and our everyday objects. My feeling is that there is a danger in bringing these two activities - painter and designer - together. Our constructed art is very close to the forms used in decoration. We frequently have to work on a razor-edge so that the pictorial compositions we imagine can't be retrieved by the decorative or, worse still, become decorative themselves. In order to guarantee that the painting will become a "presence", as I said, it obviously has to be entirely extraneous to the complacency and seduction of the decorative.

A.T. - If you look at the history of Concrete art, you can see that groups and group actions were formed at every stage of its evolution. Today it seems that artists are generally quite isolated in their studios. Is this something that you regret?

O.B. - For a painting to exist there has to be a gaze. A dialogue has to be constructed between it and the viewer. If an artist is in total solitude in their studio, this isolation will give their painting and its evolution little chance. I was lucky enough to work alongside Aurelie Nemours, who was my first viewer. When I say "viewer", it's a little weak, because her gaze was so attentive and demanding and her comments helped me immensely. So I've never felt the need to belong to a group in order to imagine collective strategies, or simply construct a dialogue. I didn't show my work very much during the first years of activity, because I benefited every step of the way from the gaze of this marvellous person whom I esteemed, and this was more than enough. In the 1980s, however, I took part in group exhibitions organised by the Galerie 30. This gallery functioned differently because it was an association and was led by artists of great intellectual quality: Jean-François Dubreuil and Pascal Mahou. My meeting with them gave rise to an ongoing friendship that is very fulfilling.

A.T. - Few women have become renowned in the field of pure forms and total abstraction. What is your interpretation of this?

O.B. — Don't expect a feminist plea from me. I find current demands for equal opportunities or parity quite unbearable. The only statement I can make is that yes, there are indeed fewer female artists in the field of radical abstraction than in other sectors, where emotional values can be expressed more frankly, no doubt. The formal vocabulary of Concrete art is tuned directly to the rational. Perhaps women have more of a propensity for the lyrical. All this is merely a set of hypotheses, I don't really have an answer to that question.

A.T. - When it came to constituting your language, which artists really counted?

O.B. - In the entire history of art, irrespective of the centuries, I put drawings first. My biggest visual emotions have come from drawings, with that fabulous tension in the line. However I must also evoke my love for the Italian Primitives and the Madonnas in icons. It is not just the faces of these Madonnas that attract my attention, but the position of their hands, which are a way of expressing withdrawal - being present and absent at the same time. There is something hieratic about their frontal position and their gaze, something that is compatible with the immaterial. I can obviously cite the graphic works of modern and contemporary artists that have interested me, the works of Max Bill and Morellet, for example, but what I'd really like to say is that the 20th-century works that catch my attention are the ones that have totally evacuated the subject, replaced it with an abstraction that uses an objective construction method.

When I look at painting from the Modern period, the subject stops me from seeing and understanding the formal and chromatic issues at stake in the painting.

A.T. - You have said that you don't like the "material effect" in painting. But to look at your recent paintings, where very subtle, scarcely nameable tones appear, one imagines that they were obtained by superimposed layers. Is that not a way of reintroducing some depth into the painting?

O.B. - When I lay a colour on a canvas I always find it too obvious, too strong, too assertive. My second layer calms down the coloured effects of the first in order to achieve the hue I want. There is a superimposition, but there is no transparency effect. So the depth that you evoke is not transmitted by the colour. The plane remains a plane. But what I do look for in some cases, when I create an imbalance between one form and another, is to make light appear. It appears in the crack liberated by these two imbalanced forms. A gap left blank.

A.T. - Is depositing a more or less fluid or dense film of coloured substance on the surface of a textile medium a gesture or a thought, in your opinion?

O.B. - I'd say it's both. I work quite slowly, so the desire for the next painting takes shape while I'm painting. If a desire forms, it means that what I'm experiencing in the current painting is making me deduce the characteristics of the next.

There is a field of possibilities around each work; each decision opens up new paths. The decision obviously gives rise to a gesture, but it is accompanied by a thought process that means you can choose one possibility rather than another.

A.T. - What do you read?

O.B. - I read a lot. First and foremost, works about mystical experiences that have been lived by extraordinary people. Texts by priests, of course. Here I had the benefit of Aurelie Nemours' library; she was deeply interested in these exceptional texts, as you know. Spending time living with the texts of Saint Teresa of Avila, as I did one whole summer, truly transports you into another space-time. I like to read the lives of the saints in general. The conviction that inhabited these people destined for sainthood, plus the form that doubt sometimes took in them and the way they overcame it, reveals the power of the human spirit, its capacity to understand what the mind cannot see but which is offered in contemplation. Curiously enough, I feel a kind of nostalgia for that life; something tells me that's where it all happens, when the agitation of the world has ceased, replaced by interiority. I'll venture a geographical comparison by saying that this saintly life makes me think of scaling the Himalayas.

Few attempt it, few reach the summit.

You asked me what I generally read, and I must finish my answer by evoking my great affection for 19th century novels that describe the destiny of families, men and women in society. Choosing to discover the full cycle of novels by the same author, reading one after the other, is a magnificent exploration that lets you grasp the mechanisms of a sensitivity, to hear the writer's voice.

A.T. - Would you have liked to conceive stained glass windows?

O.B. - What I'd have liked most of all would be to make medieval illuminations. When I was a teenager I remember talking to my girlfriends about what we hoped to do in the future. I said that I dreamed of being a monk in sandals, in an abbey, in charge of the illuminations.

A.T. - I find the detail of the sandals interesting, it evokes abstinence, rigour, indifference to the cold.

O.B. - It does indeed refer to a moral life. You can find a distant echo of it in the limited surface of the painting, when the arrangement of the shapes, lines and colours seems to translate the existence of another dimension, that of pure rhythm and the sky.

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TIGHTROPE

Human beings want to think the world. They can use concepts. These are constructed by opposition: we conceive by defining, and define by separating.

Works of art enable different thinking. Each work will, in its own way, shatter the system of concepts by showing what Surpasses them, reaches beyond and questions the opposition that founds them. To this thought - rid of concepts but not of language - each work will then say something about the world in a solitary and silent contemplative experience that can nonetheless be told.

When you sit in front of a work by Ode Bertrand - for you have to sit — what do you see that goes beyond concepts? Geometric elements? Figures (dot, line, surface), magnitudes (length, area, angle). But what becomes of these ideal figures in the drawing? The Césures present surfaces separated or opposed by summits yet already ambivalent: the figures can be read as positives or negatives. And if we use the concept of the opposite? The Ahura will subvert it by shifting the superimposition of positive and negative.

Another ambivalence: the drawings can be read in two or three dimensions. This is not illusion - which supposes a reference to a real object - but more potentiality, one drawing's capacity to give an account of two figures, or more - the power of two dimensions to give a notion of three. In this sense look at Plans and Épures, the latter in its very title.

But then in Épure 15 the concept of potentiality is convoked yet also disappointed: while the thicker stroke of a central figure encourages the viewer to see it in the space, it is impossible to materialise the entire figure. Likewise, Tourah XX evokes a five-sided polyhedron - a pyramid with a quadrilateral base - but the absence of the line for the fourth edge brings it down to a plane polygon. And even if this line were drawn, there would still be ambiguity between a polyhedron and the triangulation of a plane.

The geometric elements are themselves subverted. To describe these works you must shroud the words in incertitude: an almost triangle in Césure V, angular areas that are almost flat (180° angle), almost quadrant (90°), almost octant (45°) in Briarée, almost parallel and almost perpendicular lines in the

Obliques, almost totality in 16 896 Triangles rectangles, an almost homogenous surface in Oblique V, almost superimposition in Ahura.

This is, therefore, not geometry; we know full well that the term is unsuitable and that Ode Bertrand is not a mathematician. Concerning improper uses of the term "geometric", Stella Barauk proposes that this "practical knowledge of seeing", an individual knowledge about shapes and areas formed by intuition and experience, should be called figurative instead. How tempting it would be to invert traditional art history terminology and say that this consummate art of figures is figurative!

The layout of the elements also shatters concepts. The Sceaux propose closed figures, the shape can close in on itself, but the line's varied thicknesses evokes the movements of downstrokes and upstrokes in calligraphy, or planes articulated in the space. Conversely, CO XXVII proposes an open line. The path stops in the white, the closed circuit is energy. Thulé XXI presents a black surface opened up by the penetration of white, but this related black surface (which is one block) is a territory closed by its perimeter, which determines an interior and an exterior. When Sceau IV proposes an enclosed outline, the line intersects itself and no longer enables determination of an inside or an outside.

The Dédales have us hesitating between the autonomous squares - juxtaposed or superimposed - and the interlinks. It is the direction of the path that is at stake: on a line that doesn't cross itself, any point can be located between two others, determining two opposite directions of the line's path; this no longer applies if the line does cross itself.

The Rebis, and in particular the Volumes Virtuels (V), give the plane through the surface area, the depth. But a larger number of works give the plane through the network of lines, their fineness; paradoxically, the plane is more strongly revealed by discontinuity than by the continuous surface, whose ambiguity we have seen. In Réseaux interrompus, the interruptions dazzle like suns: their light is the focus of cohesion. Another paradox: the more coherent the plane, the less homogenous it can be. The Oblique V, with its solid construction, offers up a shimmer just like water shimmering in the light: it does not represent it, it equals it.

The work is thus constructed on these ridges of thought, on the tightrope of the unsaid, between the two slopes of clear ideas.

What does this work that does not wish to assert itself reveal of the world? Figures of the inextricable are also figures of a path. You cannot follow the lines in Oblique V, but you are oriented - towards the bright edges or else the dark thicket in the middle.

The "almost figures" barely depart from the ideal figures of geometry we all have in mind. But while close, they also stray. In the Ahura it is the slight gap printed on a superimposed figure and its negative that constructs the crack where the light bursts through. Far from knowledge, the truth.

Yet the figures of opposition are not what prevails in Ode Bertrand's work. The lines are harshly broken but delicately assembled, their interdependence prevails over the opposition between black and white. Tones are always broken.

Opposites are not confronted, a path is sought between them.

The path is a line.

He who follows the line dances on a tightrope.

Funambulists do not rest, their equilibrium lies in their rhythm. They are admirably attentive, marvellously inventive.

Funambulists are light, removed from cares.

Funambulists are brave, they turn solid ground into a risk.

Ode Bertrand was a dancer. Her work is dance.

Socrates: "But what is dance, and what can dance steps say?"

Phaedra: Do you think it represents something?

Socrates: Nothing, dear Phaedra. But all things... Love as much as the sea and life itself, and thoughts....

A body, through its simple strength and action, is powerful enough to alter the nature of things more profoundly than the mind, with its speculations and dreams, ever could!"