

## Ode Bertrand: oeuvres sur papier

Away from the hustle and bustle of the world, but not totally withdrawn from it, Ode Bertrand chose "solitude, recollection and silence". To these rules of the moral and spiritual life, in which she strongly asserted herself, she also added, with equal commitment, a counterpart arising from the living element of the body. In Mauss' words, he chose, from among "the elements of the art of using the human body", first through dance, then through drawing and painting, a painting in which the line continues to dominate. Or as "there is no technique or transmission if there is no tradition", Ode Bertrand was privileged to learn the basic techniques of the plastic arts and to be taught by his aunt Aurelie Nemours, his confidante and mentor.

Except for a few rare images that hint at the wandering of a hand articulating indistinct but generically vegetal forms, showing networks of lines resembling a tangle of brambles or vines, or evoking the progression of waves, Ode Bertrand has drastically limited the scope of his pictorial possibilities from the very beginning of his artistic commitment. Listings. No theme, or rather only abstract, minimal themes, tending towards non-existence, seeking to be forgotten in an infraphic identity. Lines, strokes, lines, straight lines, stripes, dispersed, multiplied, joined to form improbable irregular geometric figures. It should be noted that they are pursued and developed for their singular irregularities, to avoid any familiarity with the square, the rectangle or, as a general rule, any assemblage too close to the referential language of other painters of the geometric abstract movement.

Behind all these images there is a lattice, a grid, the same one initiated by Mondrian, which opened the way to the plastic cosmogony we know today through a potentially infinite play of micro-adjustments and rebalanced imbalances. The purpose and function of this grid, so well understood and subtly used by Ode Bertrand, is still to be found in Mondrian: "It is a great mistake to believe that Neo-Plasticism builds rectangular planes side by side, like stones.

The rectangular plane should rather be seen as the result of the plurality of the straight line in rectangular opposition. In painting, the straight line is undoubtedly the most exact and most just means of expressing free rhythm".

This last sentence has undoubtedly been a viaticum for the work of Ode Bertrand, who has been able to reconcile its constructive meaning with an introspective practice aimed at creating the conditions for the appearance of those same lines. And this brings to mind another approach to painting that could not have escaped him: the art of the icon.

Following Pavel Florensky, we learn that "among other processes [...], we must mention the lines known as separators [whose function] does not correspond to anything visible in the physical world [...], a system of potential lines, construction lines [...]. The lines of the separators express the metaphysical scheme of the object, and its dynamics, much more strongly than its visible lines, although in themselves they are not visible at all [...]. These lines form the outline of the reconstruction of the object in the consciousness that contemplates it [...], they are lines of force, lines of tension...".

Without extrapolating or fantasizing about invisible lines in Ode Bertrand's work, and allowing ourselves to be guided by the ones we see, the ones we think we see, the ones that appear when we take the time to look more closely, there is indeed always at play, and expressed through the play of lines, a unifying force, a tension whose purpose is clearly not plastic demonstration.

## CONVERSATION WITH ODE BERTRAND

Evelyne de Montaudouin: How did the idea of this book come about?

Ode Bertrand: I wanted a book for my works on paper. Publishing a book is very important. It perpetuates the œuvre; it is an essential tool. I spoke about it to the director of the Parisian gallery that represents my work, Rémy Mathiot, who has been supporting my art for over ten years. My previous book covered my work up until 2007; I have produced a lot since then.

Also I like paper. First because of its texture. It is such a voluptuous feeling to cut the required surface out of a large sheet. Just looking at paper inspires me to work. It is an easy medium to handle, that counts too. It is light, does not require priming, and even when the execution must be rigorous it is painted easily.

My works on paper determine my painting. But they are not sketches. That is not how I proceed. I work on paper first then on canvas because paper takes less time, though the execution must be perfect, otherwise I cannot visualize a thing, I cannot take the next step.

The work on paper has to be an accomplished piece if it is to inspire a painting. On paper I can immediately envision what will happen next. Yet, there are a few exceptions: in *Réseaux interrompus*, *Réseaux sous-tractifs*, *Hommage à John Cage* (*Interrupted Networks*, *Subtractive Networks*, *Homage to John Cage*), started off without any particular direction, from a grid as usual, but it was like when you write, each line determined the following one and so on until the end.

Then there are a few families, the Miniatures, a series of overlapping grids that can only be executed on paper. Since they are among my favorites I tried to enlarge them to make them into big paintings, but it didn't work out. What I call "hairlines", a line so thin it is practically intangible, just does not work on a large format. If I thicken the line, it's too heavy, and if I don't, there is too much empty space.

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he freestyle drawings of 1973 did not produce any paintings either, for a different reason: I did not wish to follow that course. It was just something that got thrown onto paper, at one point in my life, but I did not want my work to take that direction. It was much too chaotic.

É. M.: Could you elaborate on order and disorder?

Why do you systematically begin with the grid then add a little chaos? Why not the other way around?

O. B.: If I were to start with disorder I would feel caught in materiality, in matter. If I start off from order, a grid, I am in a happy place. First because a grid is beautiful. If I could, I would expose nothing but a grid. But that might end up being tedious.

When I intervene to add a touch of disarray the result is intriguing to the spectator. I believe one should take the time to contemplate a painting. Intriguing the viewers is my way of catching their attention.

They wonder, "how did she do that?", they ponder and spend time on it. Whether solved or not, the enigma is part of the mystery and the notion of mystery is central to my life. I am very much attached to mystery. A mystery, what a wonderful idea! In the dictionary mystery is "what cannot be understood." That is exactly what makes me happy. Enough questions! Do not try to understand everything. Stay in that zone outside of reason. I love daydreaming.

When I was a child I didn't listen much to what my teachers said. My mind would switch them off and go to my imaginary world. Of course, my studies did not go too far! I still have that ability to switch off.

So to get back to mystery, the notion evokes religion, and what I find beautiful in the Christian religion is that you are not meant to understand everything.

What we are told is mysterious, crazy. Maybe entirely invented by men, I don't know, but if that were the case, I find it even more extraordinary that men actually thought to invent such a story. See, hear, and receive, without looking to understand, what bliss.

É. M.: Your works on paper are for the most part drawings, but some are painted-in which case you investigate color-and others are collages. How do you articulate the three mediums?

O. B.: There are very few collages. I made a series Hommage à Aurelie Nemours, reminiscent of hers; my other collages are circumstance related, like for a gift. I find myself oscillating between line and color almost organically: I have such a yearning for the line that I have to return to it. But then suddenly I wish for color, a subdued color, and I try to make sure their intercourse is perfect. I like working with blacks, warm blacks and cool blacks, how voluptuous it is to bring them together! Many artists have investigated black. I have tried making a black painting like I do white paintings, but no, the painting seems obstructed, I would not be comfortable with it, I need light.

É. M.: Light is a fundamental notion in your work but it is without its corollary, shadow. In your body of work, the interaction between matter and light does not produce shadow. Your "hairlines" create transparent shapes, the flat color surfaces seem backlit, with light emerging from behind. Unlike some of the artists from your movement, you are not attached to one single space, is that correct?

O. B.: It is true that there are two levels in my paintings, one that embodies matter, and the other light. The light does not always have to be of a light or bright color. It is the second ground, it reveals. For instance, several blacks can radiate against a blue ground.

É. M.: Is that your filiation with the art of icon painting?

O. B.: Yes. Icons took the process the furthest. They have two spaces: one is the body and the other is light.

É. M.: In your opinion is art a language? And if so, what are the elements that make up yours?

O. B.: Yes, art is a language in the sense that it is addressed to a viewer from which we hope to draw a response. In my body of work, the main element is the "multitude line."

É. M.: These are segments, most often discontinued straight lines, the gesture is not visible, and your process is set beforehand but carefully monitored. Why choose the "multitude line"?

O. B.: It is almost intangible but what presence it has when it is traced! Each stroke interacts with the other, it is a dialogue. The radiation of the first stroke sets the distance and the position of the following one and so on. The very first stroke determines the entire painting. There is no effort involved for me. With color there is, I have to struggle to get it right. It does not make me as happy. In a line piece, the line is self-sufficient. It lets

me enjoy blissful passivity.

Rapture. Then I witness an apparition; it is as if all I had to do was wish for it. Depending on how close the strokes are, the light will appear, but there is always the risk that the painting becomes obscured, if the lines are too dense.

É. M.: You have often mentioned that you disagreed with the leading movements of your time. On what exactly?

O. B.: Firstly, despite the occasional formal resemblance, I have nothing in common with those who feel they can be rid of the notion of beauty. I believe all human beings carry a sort of nostalgia for something, and that thing is what I call the "notion of beauty." It cannot be defined, it is not a norm nor a canon, but an object of nostalgia, and a work of art can awaken the emotion that resonates with that particular nostalgia. Yes, an artist's duty is to provide that emotion. It is a promise every painting makes.

Even when its creator denies such a notion.

There is another thing I disagree with: this idea that an artist must suffer in order to give depth to their work. I for one do not suffer, I am happy. I go to work happy, if I try a sketch and it's no good, it still helps me find the right direction, so I am glad. I am always positive. It could be that I just do not have the strength to suffer. Producing, taking action, doing what I can and what I wish to do, yes, that makes me happy.

É. M.: Not to worry, joy is not a sign of superficiality if one refers to Spinoza. Some of your works—and this is intentional—spark people's curiosity, they are eager to understand your process. So that we may go beyond the enigma toward the mystery, could you satisfy our curiosity? Would you mind selecting one piece from the book and describing for us the various stages of its execution, so we may understand?

O. B.: In the family I named Ahura (goddess of Light), I always begin with a grid based on the oblique and another that is horizontal and vertical. First, I look for a composition made up of geometrical elements juxtaposed over the entire surface, and then I blacken one shape out of two in a check pattern (see page 23). I transfer this onto tracing paper, and then I blacken the white shapes that still remain on the original. Shifting the tracing paper slightly to the left, right, up or down produces the rays of light that bring my composition to life. Then I use two different black paints that "communicate" well.

I really enjoyed that "family", it offered a great variety of possibilities thanks to the rhythms of the grids. I was able to evolve from a composition with a single square on its tip to a multitude.

É. M.: Conviction or posture, some commentators say that one cannot, must not, should not analyze a work of art. Do you think a work of art might benefit

from commentary?

O. B.: I do. Commentary can take you further into a piece. First, those who do not yet know how to observe. Then there are preconceptions. But even those who can see, even the artist can benefit because some realizations can only be prompted by words. It is not possible to enter into a work of art without a global perspective. The commentary can be of precious help when it is able to offer that perspective on the painting you are contemplating.