

Behind The Blinds issue 3: 'The pure Accident', by Benoit Platéus, Michaël Marson and Antoine Grenez, July, 2017

Jean- Baptiste Bernadet

Brussels, July 2017

Interview by Benoit Platéus

Portrait by Michaël Marson

Studio photography by Antoine Grenez



The Pure Accident

I met Jean-Baptiste in 2002 shortly after his arrival in Brussels and have since had the opportunity to share several working periods with him during residences in New York and Los Angeles, as well as work jointly on several exhibitions and common publications. These experiences, these exchanges have allowed me to form an intuitive idea of his working process and its evolution. Jean-Baptiste is a painter who works mostly in series and his painting is neither truly abstract nor figurative. Color seems to be his main subject and in this framework, his references are numerous and varied from Monet to Josh Smith. This interview was the opportunity to formulate and clarify these instincts on his practice.

I try to vary the ways
in which paint is applied,
to let surprises happen.

BENOIT PLATÉUS: How do you envision an exhibition?

JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET: Occasionally, a group of works that I have in the studio feels satisfactory, so I look for a place to show them. Most often, I am given a space and a time frame, so I either expand what I am currently working on or what I feel like showing at the time, adapted to place and context. In both cases, the installation is essential. The exhibition space determines how many paintings, their size, how they are presented and then a narrative of sorts, which I will create in the studio. Although it will only partially be visible to the viewers, it is the real driving force behind this work. Plainly put, I don't do paintings on easels, I make exhibitions.

BP: That's also the case for your books and catalogs.

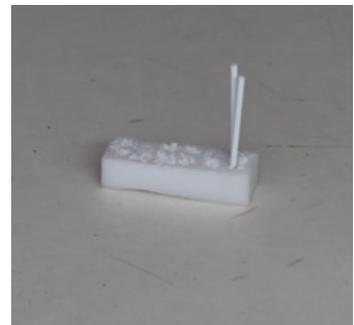
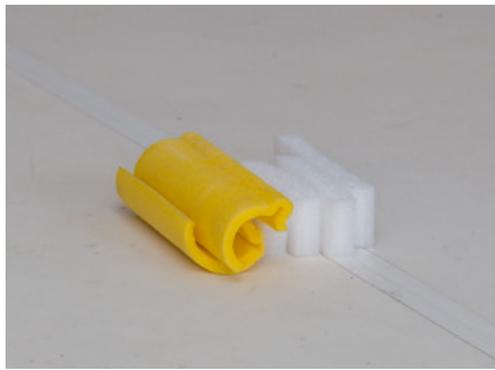
JBB: Painting from my point of view is difficult to reproduce – mine certainly is – so I see a book as a kind of derivative product. Since I am paying attention to the context of the work, I strive to capture the essence of it within the book and give the best overview of the works.

BP: How is a new series born? What is the creative impulse? Or rather, how do you work?

JBB: I produce a lot, but only show a portion of my work. Some paintings capture my interest and I develop them as groups. That's how I determine what ideas are most relevant, sharpen my expression, and insist on the fact that my work goes beyond any individual painting. At last year's Almine Rech exhibition, each of the three rooms presented a single group of works. To me, there were only 3 paintings in this exhibition when there were groups of four, twelve and five paintings.

BP: You've looked into different ways to apply paint, without using a brush. Is it to distance yourself from the work of the hand, to provoke accidents?

JBB: Years ago, a quote from Albert Oehlen struck me: he said that the best paintings looked like they had been done by "someone who'd had an accident in the studio in the absence of the artist". This notion of luck layered with the idea of an outside, perhaps divine, intervention is a marvelous way of expressing the feeling that every artist has when they are satisfied with their work, no? Oil is "my" medium, so anything that I feel beyond my control – watercolor, ceramics – gives me the opportunity to see new shapes emerge. I also try to vary the ways in which paint is applied, by working in carryovers, mechanizing my touch, to let those surprises happen.



My work locum is a group of things, places, people, memories, creative works, desires and regrets that I carry with me.

What I find is that moving requires a different relationship to the world, but no difference in the work itself.

BP: Like in your last exhibition (*Solarium, May 19 – July 1st 2017, Valentin, Paris*) where there weren't any paintings on canvases so to speak?

JBB: The idea behind this exhibition was to show other dimensions of the work and the workshop. During installation, I reduced the number of works presented and ultimately it was a painting exhibition without any canvases but with painted casts of apple tree branches and enameled lava slabs. It was very satisfying not to worry about a painting but to think about what painting meant to me. I didn't spend much time on applying paint to canvas, but rather on working on the installation – to paint without making paintings.

BP: You created a series of 255 painted ceramics titled *Untitled (flat)* that can be imagined as so many color palettes, and as a swatch book of your work past and to come. What is the importance of the palette?

JBB: The palette is where paint is as I want it ideally: if it is successful, it's by pure accident but also perfectly explainable. I don't show my palettes as they are, because they are not by nature made to survive work in the studio. The paintings on paper that I have been showing framed for the past few years are reworked – even a little – so I can't compare them to those in use. I found the same satisfaction in the plates, which are forever frozen, in my absence in a way, by the glaze being fired.

BP: What would be the ideal viewing of your work, in space as in time?

JBB: I like longer times, and the optimal, forever fixed conditions that Donald Judd has created in Marfa, or in Monet's Orangerie. But at the moment, I am happy with knowing of seeing my paintings travel around the world, far from me. As installation is important to me, my work doesn't stop at the door of the studio, but exhibitions that don't last also suit me. No space is better than another to me. The exhibition you and I did with John Roebas in Turin two years ago is a good example: the palace was magnificent but it was a complex space with frescoes, curtains, wonky doors... but I had rarely taken so much pleasure in setting up an exhibition. It's stimulating to alternate between perfect white cubes and more difficult spaces.

BP: Would you take a public contract?

JBB: Of course, since context is important to me, the idea of a lasting contextualized creation is appealing. I have projects in

mind that only need a place to become reality. But painters often have issues with this because people don't really know what a painting is for, when it's not above the chimney mantle. Institutions always want a clear message from the work, which is very complex in painting. So it's difficult for us to get these kinds of projects.

BP: Is there a place, a landscape that has been pivotal in your practice?

JBB: I would be hard pressed to give a specific location as a source of inspiration. My work locum is a constellation of things, places, people, memories, books and music, hopes, desires and regrets that I carry with me.

BP: Is that why it's so easy for you to go from one studio to the other, since you are working both out of Brussels and New York?

JBB: I wouldn't call it easy but it's necessary to my feeling of balance. What I find is that moving arouses a different relationship to the world, but no difference in the work itself.

BP: You read a lot of novels and watch a lot of TV series. What is their influence on your work?

JBB: What I have to say about my work, and that isn't much because I'm not an intellectual, comes from novels. I am a bad reader of theory, aesthetics or philosophy because I get bored quickly and don't learn much, even when I like it. I prefer artist interviews or their writings. I like that novels teach me about art as much as about love, life, how to travel or unclog toilets – true stories. TV shows play another important role: they empty my mind after a day of work.

BP: What is essential in your studio, other than the basics of your practice?

JBB: Music, and a good armchair in which to nap.

BP: Your next projects?

JBB: I'm preparing an exhibition at Almine Rech in Paris for January and, in the meantime, an exciting little exhibition with Betty Tompkins and Éric Troncy at Halsey McKay in the Hamptons at the end of October.



Installation picture 'So Far, So Close'
Courtesy of Almine Rech gallery