

In dialogue with Jean-Baptiste Bernadet

February 2015, by Piero Bisello



Jean-Baptiste Bernadet, "Untitled (Vetiver IV), 2014. © Photo : Sylvie Chan-Liat / Courtesy of the artist and Valentin, Paris.

French born and Brussels based artist Jean-Baptiste Bernadet is arguably one of the most popular painters of his generation at the moment. His current show at Chez Valentin in Paris titled *Vetiver* features recent works on canvas in which the artist uses the full potential of oil paint in gestures that challenge the viewer's perception of colours' and shapes' blending properties and break the references to figurativeness and abstraction. In the middle of a challenging relocation of his atelier to a bigger and more functional space in Forest neighbourhood, we reached him at his temporary studio in central Brussels to talk about his position as an artist beyond his contingent work, the creative system nowadays, art history and literature.

What are you working on at the moment?

I have different projects but what keeps me busy the most is a wall-scaled large painting that will cover all the available surface of a booth at Art Brussels, a solo show in collaboration with Valentin gallery. Working with this scale, I found out that there's something interesting about a wider and more cinematic ratio of pictures, something that in my case empowers the romantic aspect of my painting.

Do you ever think about how your work could be received in institutions?

Not concretely at the moment. You know, some of the friends who studied with me in France survive today only with institutional exposure and maybe that's also what I was trained to achieve during my studies. But especially if you are a painter, there is very little possibilities that your pieces would be easy to integrate in institutional group shows. At the same time I'm not defending painting in itself, a medium that for many others becomes a sort of religion. My practice spans other lines of research and I believe there is a clear intellectual core that connects everything I am making, a sort of homogeneity that could perhaps be better expressed in institutional shows. With no intention whatsoever to make it sound like a political remark, one should also keep in mind that in the US, which is a reality I know well, commercial success might as well come before getting to exhibit in museums. Arriving to that point would be for me the moment where I could look at my practice in a different way, more detached from a specific production of works.

Are you able to picture your art in a general private space that stands beyond that of the gallery where you have installed it?

I am very demanding on how my work should be placed in the space so I prefer not to think about where one of my paintings is installed after it is gone out of my control.

Is there a specific space you would like to see a painting of yours installed in?

It is hard to say because, as I mentioned, the space where my work is displayed is so important for me that it often comes before the making of the work itself. So in this case a better question would probably be the inverted version of yours: how would your piece look like if it was installed in this or that specific space?

Do you ever find yourself thinking about how your art will look like in 10 years or it will be contextualised by historians in the future?

Every single piece I make is part of something bigger. There is a real connection in my mind about how a single painting or even a series can make sense with the previous and the next. In this regard, this is the sense of time I often find myself conscious of.

If otherwise we are talking about so called history or social or collective time, I don't think as an artist I can be aware of what my position will be. For the present, it is important that my work remains contemporary without struggling to be fashionable.

We seem to live a moment where more and more machines are employed to make art while more and more gestural signs are used in design, a moment where artists collaborate with industries and where industries break into the art world. In this context, do you think we still need a separation between these two categories of art and design?

I haven't seen any good examples where these two crossed and produced something interesting, so in a way I think we might still do. I believe those separations can still be important to browse an otherwise complicated environment of references. Besides the word art has been used too often out of its context to enhance the image of very marketable products like cars or clothes, which are objects I can surely appreciate for the craftsmanship and technology that stand behind them but that at the same time I wouldn't call art.

If one looks at the historical avant-gardes, especially Russian constructivism and suprematism, one sees that abstract painting had a clear political significance. Do you think it can still assume the role these pioneers wanted it to have?

I don't think the separation between abstract and figurative painting can still be regarded in the same way. The problem of these two categories opposing each other that many artists tried to solve from the 50s till at least Gerhard Richter is not a problem anymore, and perhaps it was never one. In this regard I find very hard to say that abstract art as a genre has any political significance these days. Talking about the role of art and painting in particular in our society, I used to think it had the great mission of subverting the progressive shift to digital and online images we seemed to be oriented to. After 15 years I've now come to terms to seeing things on the screen even though the real experience of painting as a container and symbol for the time of its making still remains for me an alternative to the monocacy of digital images.

Talking about the market, what are the qualities you like in art dealers? And in collectors?

I am not close enough to collectors to name a specific quality. And when it comes to art dealers and the market in general, I have only one strategy to handle them at best: concentrating exclusively on my studio work. I give myself clear tasks about what I should do in there while everything that happens after my pieces are outside is somebody else's job.

Also from the answers you've given during this interview, you seem very interested in the art of the past. Which one is your favourite old master?

Defining an old master is quite problematic for me. What I can say is that there is definitely a lineage in art history I feel related to and also arrives to my contemporaries. It starts from Venetian renaissance painters Bellini, Titian and Tintoretto, it passes through the impressionism and post-impressionism of Monet and Bonnard, Manet, Vuillard, it arrives to the work of Josh Smith, Joe Bradley or Wolfgang Tillmans through Picabia, Polke, Kippenberger and Warhol.

I found out that you like to read novels more than art critique. Which novel do you think is comparable to your idea of art?

I always thought people answering Proust to this kind of questions were a bit pretentious but I must admit that's my answer too. His work is like a cathedral whose beginning and end he knew well. This is also the way I see my oeuvre: a coherent body of work that is larger than its single pieces.