César Piette

Hyper Plastic Realism

In creating a jaw-dropping, hyper-plastic universe that lures viewers into a territory where conventional painting merges with modern technology and tools, César Piette nurtures and maintains respect for classical art traditions. As he completely removes brush marks from the surface of his paintings, insists on smiling sitters, and offers his sketches, actual digital files, as NFT originals, Piette pushes the established medium and its hierarchies into new heights, or as the more conservative among us might argue, way down to some clever new lows.

Sasa Bogojev: **When we spoke the first time a few years back, you mentioned trying to make "the worst painting" that you could, and this resulted in your current style. Please elaborate on what that painting included or excluded.**

César Piette: I do believe that my works tackle the idea of what an acceptable painting should be. If I had to describe them, I would say that they are color-saturated, illusionistic, without marks or textures, flat, cartoony, non-narrative, and self-referential. Presented like this it sounds a bit scary, and it's not the archetype of paintings we expect. I can't develop each point, but to me, the two most disturbing points are the absence of marks on one hand, and the cute imagery on another.

The effect I get with an airbrush is really sleek, cold, clean, and illusory, so it can be difficult to get into. You can paint with an airbrush and feel the material of the paint much more, but in my work, you've got almost nothing. The diverse attempts made by previous painters are highly associated

with traces of authorship, as if their activity has been recorded on the surface.

And, on the other hand, the cute imagery is way too much for true lovers and connoisseurs of painting. Cuteness telescoped with such traditional concerns can be hard to handle. Even if a lot has been done since the last century to diversify imagery, this is unbearable for a lot of people.

The smiles really emphasize your point.
Of course, smiles increase this high and low effect. Smiles are pretty rare in the history of painting. And we can easily understand why—they don't make things appear serious. If you want to reach a high moral value impact, it's difficult to make the characters smile. A painting by Jacques-Louis David with smiling characters would be quite weird.

Also, I found it interesting to learn that one possible reason why smiles are pretty rare in the tradition of portraits was that dental health was so bad in past centuries that a lot of people had bad teeth. So a smile would allow for brownish teeth or missing teeth to appear, which would be pretty unaesthetic. And that's why I usually do only a few teeth.

On the other hand, in representation, the smile is an expression of character. The thing is that there is no narrative in my paintings, they don't describe complex scenes that you have to understand. They show what they show. So, if only a still and narrative-free scene is depicted, what should I do with the expression of my characters? I could have chosen to go without expression, but I was thinking I could achieve neutrality by using a really strong emotion. I've tried to reach neutrality by other means. When you see a smile in a painting—it's a smile. When you see 50 smiles, you don't see the smile anymore, or this smile becomes something else. That was the question—can an expression say something else?

Are you concerned about technology becoming such a big part of art-making, especially something so manual as painting?
I guess an important element in my work is the craft. I do want to make something with my hands even if it's modeling with software. Computers have taken so much place inside our lives for a few decades that it means a lot to still want to do something with my hands. Recently, I found that I've been highly receptive to objects loaded with time. It is truly emotional to be able to look at a piece of art that is 20,000 or 25,000 years old in a museum or a book. The human hand is still a great added value.

On the other hand, technology has been here for several millions of years, since Homo habilis. The mind's abstraction to think of material and anticipate the shapes you will get when you hit quartz is a revolution. In a sense, artists have always worked with technology. Moving heavy stones, sculpting rocks, blending eggs with pigments, studying perspective or anatomy, developing camera obscura or paint tubes, working with benday dots, silkscreens, 3D renderings, it's all about innovation and technology, so I don't see how I could have avoided this. Their use also can be understood as statements or comments on their time.

Do you consider the airbrush revolutionary, and what do you think are its most stellar properties?
Firstly, airbrushes have been there since merely the beginning of art. I don't reduce it to a weird object or something out of fashion that suddenly became fashion again. Blowing paint is one of the most natural things to create pieces of art. But I have been working with oil for several years, so I was pretty aware of what oil can look like. You can achieve sleek renderings with oil, so I first tried to paint my 3D pictures with oil, but found the paintings disappointing. I have in mind a quote from Willem de Kooning, who said, "Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented." In the beginning, I didn't get this. Several years later, when I failed to paint these renders in oil, it just hit me—oil is too organic!

I do believe that even with clean, smooth renders, you always have something warm and organic with oil. I wanted exactly the opposite. I wanted to get them cold, synthetic, and digital. With an airbrush, you don't even touch the surface of the painting; this is a distance tool, the appearance is very cold. And there is also something interesting with it— when you put a mark of oil painting on a canvas, it's in three dimensions, even when smooth. Oil has too much consistency. The thing is the airbrush marks are so thin that you do not get this third dimension, you do not have the depth. Which is much closer to the two dimensions of the screen and the digital. So, I guess the airbrush imposed itself formally and conceptually. The supports I use also play a significant role in the paintings'

rendering. They are completely smooth without texture and light up the pictures, compared to a canvas, which has a tendency to darken the paintings because of this texture of linen.

Did you ever think that this level of recognition could be achieved with such an unorthodox painterly technique?
I don't think the tools you're using condition yourself to success or failure. Duchamp has exhibited industrially manufactured objects in an art context, Klein painted with bodies, and some people are printing their paintings. I mean, it's all about the meaning. History proved you can do art with any objects or material.

I remember when you were a bit frustrated with the imperfection of your work. Do you feel more satisfied at this point, or how do you feel about where you are in that manner?
I would talk more about materiality or physicality. I try to surf on this fine border of what is digitally produced and hand produced. I try to get paintings as clean as possible to get the confusion about what the viewer is watching. You have to look

Above: Still life with rabbit, Acrylic on panel with PU varnish, 43" x 43", 2020

closely to know that it's painted. So, of course, you need imperfections; if not, how could we know it's painted? I'm always disappointed about the rendering of the paintings at first, but in the end, I tend to finally accept them and let the works live their own lives. Colors shifts, painting drops, scalpel marks, etc., even if they are light, they make the paintings what they are—a physical object. But it doesn't mean that I'm not trying to improve my technique. I think I still have a margin to get better.

How do you feel about this quick but intense journey from making what you perceive as the worst painting to garnering the appreciation you're getting these days?
I think everything went better in my career when I stopped worrying about what people thought or expected. I was going nowhere just because I was trying to please everybody. This led to nowhere. You have to achieve a certain radicality in your choices if not you're just making the kind of work others do. But, anyway, to be honest, I do think you do the work for yourself first. You have to worry about how the viewer is going to experience your work and how it will be received. But when you are stuck 10 hours a day on a vertical surface spraying paint, believe me, you'd better love or trust what you do. If not, it is torture. So I try to keep things this way, like making pictures I love to paint. If others are interested also, that's the cherry on top. But to finish answering your question, I don't get the feeling it went quickly. It took me 10 years of struggle, hope, and depression. But what better feeling in life than to fight really hard for something and to finally start getting some results?

Will the show include any NFT works, and how do you see those relating to the rest of your practice?
Yes, I think we are going to offer NFTs along with the gallery show. There will be maybe 4 or 5 files available, which are the ones I used to paint some of the paintings in the show. This way I'm not trying to question the authenticity or copy of an artwork. But I'm searching to interrogate the relationship and hierarchy of a final painting and its preparatory study. The digital sketch can be considered as a detailed study, and I have always been interested in the question of how I should consider this study. I do believe that if I use physical materials to paint a picture, this process leads automatically to a conversion of the digital into the physical, even if it's clean. So, now that Blockchain can authenticate any file as a unique work, how does that affect this hierarchy? Should we still consider the digital sketch as inferior? That's the point and it's a painting-related question, more than a technological one.

What sort of pressure or relief did recognition by someone like Almine Rech bring to your

practice, or for that matter, life in general?**
Of course, things are no longer like when I was in my studio and absolutely nobody wanted to see what I was doing. I have bigger visibility now. But the pressure was also really high back then. Because when it doesn't work, you have poor self-esteem, and you feel the psychological pressure of society on you. Being an artist is great, but you have to be a successful artist. The "artist loser" is something really unpleasant. So, I do feel the pressure, but I feel also more serene. I also think an artist is someone who is not a machine and that the periods in the work can bring more or less attention. I mean, how can you try to build a career and assume you will always be at the top? You have to be prepared for these kinds of difficulties.

But, seriously, I don't see the recognition you're talking about. Showing with a great gallery is amazing but it also means that you fit the market's commercial standards. To be honest, I don't feel as if I have achieved a consensus at all for now. I'm popular in the toys and merch community but it's far from the case in contemporary art. A lot of people can't stand this kind of work. I think it will take years to make it if I even manage to!

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Above: *Landscape with Mountains*, Acrylic on panel with PU varnish, 47" x 59", 2020