ALMINE RECH

Maillol — Lüpertz
A lineage

Nov 15, 2024 — Mar 23, 2025 | Musée Maillol, Paris, France

Maillol receives Lüpertz, or is it the other way round? From 15 November to 23 March, the Musée Maillol is presenting a new dialogue between the two artists in its permanent collections. The German master of neo-expressionism, known for dynamiting classical perfection, chose his fi liation, that of Maillol, who also, under an apparent easy harmony, hides many plastic audacities.

The idea of bringing the work of Markus Lüpertz into resonance with the collection of the Musée Maillol provides an in-depth look at the German artist's output and was a sine qua non. Lüpertz is one of the great exponents of neo-expressionism, and a lover of form. The major retrospectives at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2015 and the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2019 were not intended to place him within the narrative of art history, but rather to position him explicitly within contemporary art. Yet Lüpertz is more closely bound up with art history than any other artist of his generation. That's why, in 2022, the Musée d'Orléans decided to exhibit his work as an artist of the past.

In the same vein, but in a more intimate setting, Aristide Maillol is hosting Markus Lüpertz. A German artist, a 'painter-sculptor' as he calls himself, has chosen to follow in Maillol's footsteps - with him, and after him. Maillol, the bubbly one, whose works breathe plenitude, declining the brilliance of a living beauty, the presence of a harmonious and silent body, will be mixed with thirty large-format, small and large-scale canvases.

This is the work of a modern-day artist who has never wanted to give up painting and sculpting, and who has never stopped questioning what we do with the past and what we can do with it because, in his view, there is no such thing as tradition on the one hand and creation on the other. It's a modern, anti-nostalgic response that is a joyous part of history.

Tradition is not traditionalist

In his clearly polemically-titled book, *The Tradition of the New,* published in 1959, Harold Rosenberg did not mince his words about the modern and the idealisation of the rebellious, if not revolutionary, character of the avant-garde. 'Modern art's famous break with tradition (he wrote) lasted long enough to create its own tradition'. This formula requires two comments. The first is that it is not as easy to escape from tradition as the fable of the tabula rasa would have us believe. The second is that tradition is created, and that there are many traditions. So when it comes to art, the new and tradition are linked, and this is not a paradox.

The links between the new and tradition are indeed long-term. In a way, they characterise one tradition among others, our own. It develops between its 'classical' version in the Age of Enlightenment and its interpretation by the Romantics. We are talking about 'genius', as it emerged as a concept in the eighteenth century after much debate. It is represented both by the two emblematic figures of German classicism, Goethe and Schiller, and by Kant's definition of it. Two artists and 'their philosopher', since the latter was read and commented on by them. Genius is 'exemplary originality': exemplarity here does not mean submission to rules, on the contrary; for if there is exemplarity, it is because the genius does not apply a rule that pre-exists him, but that his work contains rules from which other works will be possible. This definition is intended to be a balanced solution: originality does not have to be excessively individualised; it is tempered by exemplarity, and the universal character of the work is thus preserved. Romanticism does not deny it, but attributes to genius a psychological personality, a singularity, at a distance from exemplarity, to avoid diminishing if not neutralising originality. This makes it easier to mythologise the artist as a ‘great personality’, whose radical singularity is a sign of his creative power. The Romantic movement thus embraced the idea of a free, poetic imagination, and its expression in a 'fantasy' that rubbed shoulders with dreams and phantasmagoria. Which is not to say that there is no connection with history, quite the contrary. In 1844, at the end of the Romantic period, the aesthetician F. Th. Vischer in his *State of Painting Today*, set out his task for the art of the future: 'What remains is the inexhaustible material from which time, which loves change, draws the strength it needs to give birth to new life: the past, history. We yearn for history again, and that is why the history that precedes us is our substance'. The Romantic path links up with the past in all its plurality, reviving those that have been forgotten or neglected. It takes up old frayings and brings them to life, constructing its artistic solutions through games of dissonance, if not disarticulation, which deliberately undermine the classical principle of the harmonious coherence of the finished work as a whole.

Markus Lüpertz adheres to this romantic conception of consistency that is not based on consonance, without abandoning the classical thread. While he remains wary in principle of what the term tradition might imply in terms of academism and traditionalism, he weaves and reweaves his connections with the past, but with the past of painting, as the bases and ground that guide him, in an ongoing discussion with the forms that other painters have proposed. Markus Lüpertz is a great teacher and director of institutions, and is well aware of the relationship that all artists necessarily have with history, their own history and the history of their own art. He maintains that 'the role of the artist is to be situated in the art of his century' (interview opening the catalogue of his exhibition at the MMOMA in Moscow, 2021). This does not prevent him, on the contrary, from opposing, as a painter, a modernity that is contemporary to him and which he considers to be deprived, in the name of his freedom, of its own historicity. In this way, he has valiantly resisted the orchestration of the motif of the end of art, the breeding ground for the apology of the break between the then and the now, and in particular the end of painting brought about by the emergence of other media and practices. Far from abandoning painting on the grounds of obsolescence, against both Duchamp and Pop Art, as a modern anti-avant-garde he never ceased to assert an 'I am a painter', a painter-sculptor moreover.

'I have a link with classicism, simply because it's part of the tradition. Painting uses a vocabulary that comes from classicism. And because time has passed, the forms are already abstract, so I can use them to paint a woman or a flower... Painting is about stopping time and, by resurrecting the ancients, I'm stopping it. There's nothing new in painting. It's always the same vocabulary. It's a big mistake to think that painting could be replaced or expanded.' (interview with Philippe Dagen, 2015). As you can see, the bar is set high. Painting must continue, it has power over time and its changes and, if you'll pardon the expression, it has the power to demand the 'resurrection of the ancients', which has nothing to do with neo-classicism. This loaded expression is no accident of the pen. The 'old' do not die, painting is alive, the new is held in the past and in history, activated by the resurrection powers of the artist, the all-powerful creator with whom Lüpertz identifies.

Who is Markus Maillol?

What then of the invention of this hybrid being, the fruit of a pause in time perhaps, or of a resurrection, that would be Markus Maillol? The current practice is often one of comparatism, in the perspective of a ‘global’ art narrated by the exhibition; it is coupled with frequent recourse to a system of association, of pairing two artists, whether they have actually confronted each other in their contemporaneity, or whether the exhibition constructs this confrontation. The Markus Maillol exhibition is about something other than ‘Maillol AND Lüpertz’. Markus Maillol is an invention of identity, borne by the artist himself, as evidenced by a signature on a painting by Lüpertz. It signals a link, without there being any substitution by taking over the old, or any return to notions of imitation, influence or inspiration. The MM of their respective signatures point in the same direction, beyond the Maillol Lüpertz that Lüpertz used. So there is something at play here for Lüpertz, which should not be confused with ‘after Maillol’, a modality that Lüpertz practised for a number of ‘old masters’: let's mention a few names, Poussin, Goya, Hans von Marées, Corot, Puvis de Chavanne, but also de Kooning, Picasso, Matisse and others.

The 'd'après' is a system that combines the idea of a constellation in which an artist participates, because he is never alone, even if he isolates himself, with the possibility of a distance, a gap, and therefore of a game, the game that takes place between two pieces that do not fit perfectly, and the free play of the imagination. The 'd'après' refers to the practice of painters, their easels in the museum in front of the great masters and the apprenticeship that comes from studying their paintings: it's a particular understanding linked to a sensitive and intellectual making of their paintings. This 'd'après' is an after, linking the past to the present in an attention to the presence of forms. This is what Lüpertz expresses with this provocation: 'there is nothing new in painting'. This is why the conception of art history in terms of inheritance is probably not the right register for grasping what is happening between artists. Inheritance is like an 'object', and in fact it is. Binding from the moment it is accepted, it does not sufficiently reflect the freedom of the subject that is the artist, the freedom that a work both demands and proves. The lineage chosen implies neither a blood relationship nor a contract. One can have several lineages and combine them without any exclusivity clause, without the burden or debt of what has been received. The aim of this relationship is to understand how the works relate to each other over time. As an origin desired by the artist, linked to a decision that ties what has been to what is not yet, in a suspension of time, as change, lineage builds itself in the present. It situates the production of works in their history and traditions, but is not a system of rootedness. What Lüpertz calls the vocabulary of painting is a structure, a form itself, a formative force, and therefore an openness, through the interplay of transformations of already existing forms, to other possible, unforeseen forms. So the context cannot be totally decisive, even if the activity of the singular individual that is the artist, his action, is invented and deployed there. He is aware of this and accepts it, on condition that the context does not produce a 'painting of ideas', because there is no other commitment than in painting, and therefore apart from any ideology. So there is nothing mechanical or overdetermined about it. If 'the artist must have an origin, must know where he comes from', as Goethe said, he must invent where he is going, with the vocabulary of forms that is at his disposal and of which he has freedom of use, without assignment to a slavish imitation linked to his place in the course of the history of his art.

— Danièle Cohn