ALMINE RECH

Tursic & Mille
Tenderness

Sep 7 — 24, 2022 | Paris, Turenne (Front Space)

In May 1959, Danish painter Asger Jorn (1914 – 1973) presented "Modifications [1]", an exhibition at the Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris comprised of twenty or so paintings - mostly bought at flea markets - onto which he had in turn painted abstract or figurative motifs. The part-covering operation left the original paintings visible alongside the added elements. Among these works (*Dans le Mille, Détournement de paysage, Arbre arbitraire, La vie d'une nature morte…*) was *Le canard inquiétant* [2], a peaceful country landscape with a little house to the right of which Jorn added a huge, garishly-coloured duckling in the impastoed expressionist style, in stark contrast with the more conventional original, itself signed "Berton" in black, bottom right. Jorn added his own signature to the "improved [3]" painting, also in black.

Jorn was one of the founders of the CoBrA movement in 1948 (in reaction to the quarrel between abstraction and figuration), then the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB) in 1955, and later the Situationist International in 1957; in the catalogue for his "Modifications" exhibition, he published a text/poem titled "Détourned Painting" that came with a warning: "INTENDED FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC. READS EFFORTLESSLY." It begins like this:

"Be modern,
collectors, museums.
If you have old paintings,
do not despair.
Retain your memories
but détourn them
so that they correspond with your era."

On June 7, 1959, Guy Debord wrote to Asger Jorn: "Your exhibition has created a major shock."

Situationist "game" theories (which underpinned Jorn's "improved canvases") are definitely at work in the actual painting process that Tursic & Mille have been developing for the past twenty years. Although both are keen to avoid debating how they paint "with four hands", they do admit that their works often make a strange vertical journey from the workshop of one on the first floor to the workshop of the other on the second floor, in one direction then in the other (a "vertical ping pong", as they call it) - and sometimes not at all. When this happens, one artist "improves" on the other's painting, and so on, as they have no precise preconception of what the canvas will ultimately look like: their painting is "made by being made", often dictating its own rules, forcing the artists to a form of pragmatism. Their elaborate "layering" process is much more sophisticated than the traditional approach based on considering the background, and then the elements placed on the background: each new stage augments, or sometimes obliterates the previous one, and forces them to reconsider the painting in its entirety. Here, the painting commands. *Tenderness*, on show at Almine Rech Paris (and which gave its title to the exhibition [4]), is not a found and "augmented" painting, but rather an image of the whole process - more precisely a recording of the process, or at least its designation as a remarkable and singular event.

It would be an understatement to say that Jorn's painting has cast its ominous shadow on the work of Tursic & Mille, who as early as 2013 painted a large canvas fittingly titled *Le canard inquiétant*. Featuring five female characters, it only departs from black and white to reveal a yellow, orange-beaked duck in its midst, in all respects identical to the plastic bath toy popular with children since the 1970s (a later sex-toy version called "vibrating duck" was surely not disagreeable to Tursic & Mille). The little duck became a recurring motif in their work: *Jeune fille pleurant son canard* (2019); pattern *à la Toroni*, repeated like a brushstroke in *Untitled* (2018); substituted for the book the young girl reads in Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Jeune fille lisant* (1770) for their own *Jeune fille pensant* (2020) – to name but a few.

"*We discovered the painting when we were students at the Beaux-Arts in Dijon; it was a true revelation for us"*, say Tursic & Mille. *"While in France, painting seemed to some extent moribund and self-flagellating, Jorn managed to instil a sense of freshness, humour, freedom and insolence. This painting showed us that anything was possible, that painting was a tool both simple and powerful."*

In 2020, Tursic & Mille made a small oil on wood (63 x 53 cm) titled *The Encounter (After Asger Jorn),* augmenting Jorn's painting with a T-Rex. In *Tenderness*, a much larger oil on canvas (230 x 320 cm), Tursic & Mille chose to sign the painting too, adding the initials "TM" to the copy of Jorn and Berton's names. As they never sign their paintings on the front (like most artists today), the initials are less that authoritative, although they actively participate in blurring the tracks of authority: TM for Tursic & Mille, or perhaps TM for Trade Mark? What does a triple-signed painting signal in an age where everyone seeks to claim credit for their contribution[5] to a project far greater than themselves? Unquestionably, the surrealist "game" and its great freedom would today be faced with many hurdles. *Tenderness* offers a contemporary take on the Jorn painting it is based on, a take which *"correspond(s) with (our) era"* through both its conceptualization and execution: with its unyielding colour palette and masterful pictorial dexterity, it truly gives the mind and taste matter for excitement.

— Eric Troncy, Director of Consortium Museum, Dijon and Editor-in-Chief of Frog Magazine

[1] *Modifications, 6* – 28 May 1959, Galerie Rive Gauche, 44 rue de Fleurus, 75006 Paris.

[2] On permanent display at the Museum Jorn in Silkeborg, Denmark, *Le canard inquiétant* (*The Disquieting Duck*) was vandalized on 29 April 2022 by an individual who defines herself as "a lesbian woman trapped in a man's body" and later claimed the act was intended to spark a conversation around ownership. The act of vandalism consisted in gluing a photograph of herself on Jorn's painting and adding her own signature in black permanent marker alongside those of Jorn and Berton.

The event was livestreamed on Facebook with the comment "If you're around, you can go and admire my new work." The museum remains unable to confirm that the canvas can be adequately restored.

[3] Asger Jorn called these works "improved canvases", later preferring the term "modifications".

[4] Likewise, *Tenderness* also gave its title to the Tursic & Mille retrospective recently held at the Consortium Museum, Dijon (4 February – 22 May 2022)

[5] The little cluster of signatures surely echoes the recent legal case Maurizio Cattelan won against one of his fabricators.