ALMINE RECH

Claire Tabouret
Portraits

Oct 2 — Nov 16, 2019 | London

"Living with One Another in the World": Claire Tabouret's *Portraits*

We, each "I-the-person" and all of us together, belong

to the world as living with one another in the world.

Edmund Husserl

1/ *One on One*: the Unicity of the *Self* –

The *Portrait* as the Mark of One Presence

Portraiture might be defined as the daunting task of rendering the presence of the *other*, with regard to both an internal and external likeness. Portraiture stems from the secular tradition of sketching or giving life to the image of someone else, and conversely, imbuing this image with life, capturing the unique inner and outer likeness of the individual or group. Indeed, central to the very mission of a successful portrait is a symmetrical two-way pendulum which takes us from life to image, and from image to life – and back again. Claire Tabouret has been thoroughly engaged in such problematics in the creation of deeply personal portraits, over the past year or so. In this latest group of works, Tabouret aptly and singularly addresses the *other*, in her/his radical otherness, and delivers her personal sense of each presence. The body of work marks a notable transition within her oeuvre: Moving away from her monumental groups representing figures largely unknown and unfamiliar, the current works currently on display at Almine Rech inject a dose of intimacy and familiarity, yet unseen in her work – for these paintings depict members belonging to the artist's personal world.

Tabouret's *Portraits*, echo some of the core problems addressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his life-long *travail*, such as the task of displaying "the native bond between myself perceiving someone and the someone whom I perceive" – this precious, unique, and irreplaceable relationship between myself and the *other*. Indeed, a close analogy exists between Claire Tabouret's present *Portraits* and the groundwork of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Profound parallels can be drawn between the program of phenomenology and her specific approach to painting a portrait. In both fields, the *presence* of the being in front of us can never be fully delivered: neither phenomenology, nor painting can completely render the actual being through descriptions or depictions. Thus, Tabouret's *Portraits* are *traces* of the life of her companions. One could also draw a pun with the French term "tracer" (delineate): the verb 'tracer' suggests both a line and a trace. The presence of the sitter is *traceable* through her very *Portraits* and, paradoxically, at the same time, escapes all lines. While painting a portrait, Cézanne's once claimed:

> *A pale palpitation envelops the linear elements.*

Few words could describe more aptly what we see happen through Tabouret's *Portraits* today. This paradox appears to be constitutive of this group of *Portraits*. In all aspects, life transcends or escapes the boundaries made by line: this is true both for Merleau-Ponty and for Tabouret. No one understood this better than Ingres who impeccably expressed the inherent paradox at the core of drawing/painting a portrait:

Drawing is the probity of art. To draw does not mean simply to reproduce contours; drawing does not consist merely of line; drawing is also expression, the inner form, the plane, modeling. See what remains after that.

What "remains" ('le reste'/the 'left over') is precisely this trace of a presence that ties Tabouret's pursuit to the mission of phenomenology. The relationship between the presence of her models in her studio, and the *representation* of these models on the canvas is not a relation of equivalence, i.e, 1:1. In fact, within Tabouret's *Portraits*, $1 \neq 1$. Part of the layered fascination that results from gazing at, and into her paintings, stems from some kind of enriching incongruity between *one* and the *other*. In her examination of these others, closest to her, Tabouret explores two opposing vectors –one which looks inward and one which looks outward.This incongruity has to do with the dose of life that her models carry into each image. There is a transfer of energy or spilling over (*débordement*) between the presences of her models and the final image that Tabouret delivers. A major success of this exhibition is the great attention to this 'spilling' effect (débordement).

Portraits poignantly alludes to the uniqueness of each individual sitter, through series of indirect steps, oblique interstices, and moments of reflections. For, the being of the sitter is itself in perpetual movement. The sitter never remains still. Thus, the challenge is this: to catch this being, this presence, while they are never still or static. This situation conveys the very existence of each of Tabouret's models and again conjures up Cézanne's own words as he personally was describing the complex and challenging process he was going through in attempting to paint the eyes of one of his close friends:

You see, this miniscule tone which shades beneath the eyelid has moved. Good. I correct it. But then the light green next to it looks too strong. I tone it down. ... I continue with imperceptible strokes all around. The eye looks better. But the other one, then, looks a little crossed to me. It looks at me. While the other one looks at his life, his past, at you, at I don't know what, something which is not me, which is not us...

The sitter is caught on the other side of the easel by the artist's gaze who, similarly, can never stay still. Activated by a constant flow of pictorial and existential reflections, these portraits articulate the ceaseless individuality of the subject by colliding with, collapsing, and reinforcing the boundaries between art and life. It was Husserl (known as the father of phenomenology, and a great influence on Merleau-Ponty) who established this distinction between the world and the *living world* (Lebenswelt). Husserl explained in terms that strongly resonate with Tabouret's project:

In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as a universal horizon, as a coherent universe of existing objects, we, each "I-the-woman" and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world.

2/ Duality – the Portrait as a Ceaseless Dialogue

This "living-with-one-another-in-the-world", as described by Husserl, appears to address the principal feature delivered to us through *Portraits*, which highlights the uniqueness of every single sitter depicted. It also leads us to the second feature of this project, which declares how inseparable the sitter is from the artist.

Each portrait acts as an interface or a thin membrane where, in effect, the traces of a silent exchange or a dialogue between the artist and their subject, comes to be inscribed on the canvas. As Oscar Wilde playfully noted:

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals him/[her]self.

With more gravitas, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas adds to our notion of the *self* by suggesting that it is wholly derived from our face-to-face interactions with another person, or *the other*. It is through this *other* that we are able to interact, react, and reflect on who we are, since "the face that looks at me *affirms* me." With a mix of great veracity and profundity, Tabouret surveys the depth of human experience through those with whom she shares her space. Here, space can be understood in both a physical sense – such as in the studio – and a psychological one. Re-engaging with her figurative practice on a new footing, Tabouret's *Portraits* present the faces of *the other* who have affirmed her. Thus, *Portraits* turns into a reflexive game, a measure of dual perception *and* reciprocal acknowledgement. It is through this very exchange that the artist and the sitter each attain their own subjectivity, their own authorship, and their own *presence*.

Tabouret's previous bodies of works suggested narratives through layers of biography and allegory. *Portraits*, however, forgoes any unifying narrative, in order to further reveal the artist's dedication to inspecting the nature of identity and intersubjective relationships. In capturing her friends and relatives, she ceases to work in large formats, preferring instead to treat these subjects on a more personal and intimate scale. The artist herself has stated that "*to paint someone is to care for them*." She thus brings a tenderness to the act of looking which displaces the voyeuristic gaze so commonly associated with traditional portraiture. Her relationship to a particular person is often couched in her memory through a particular light and a certain glow. In her paintings of Pierre, for instance, Tabouret adopts a quasi-impressionistic mode, wherein, the subject is simultaneously rendered through close observation and a slightly sketchy approach. She also builds up the image of the presence of her sitter through various layers of paint. The underpaint, typically of an acidic, fluorescent, tone, progressively softens the composition through an array rich ochers and earth tones that come next. Leaving only the highlights to be articulated through the exposure of the incandescent priming. The artist recently noted she is very attuned to the connections between light and color, to memory – thus we are truly seeing the sitter through her filter, while simultaneously gaining access to Tabouret's psyche.

3/ Trio : The Portrait as a Triangular Relation between Artist, Sitter and Viewer

We went from portraiture as a reflexive relationship, whereby the author of a portrait addresses a *self*—either the unique self of the sitter in front of her, or her own *self*. We saw that, either way, the author's own *self* remains the conduit, the vectorial force that runs through the entire portrait.

We then established that the *Portrait* can become an arena where a dialogue (or a duologue) is being activated between the artist and the *other*, facing her.

Finally, we are now looking at the *Portrait* in its plural dimension – the *Portrait* becomes the interface between the artist and her world. This third dimension is best conjured up through the expression coined by Edmund Husserl, in the title of this essay:

...living with one another in the world.

Three dimensions, therefore, are being activated within Tabouret's *Portraits* : the uniqueness of the *one and only*, the duality of the dialogue of "*one another*", and the plurality of the world within which, and out of which these *Portraits* are completed. There are several ways in which the *world* is summoned within the artist's latest works. First, each sitter likely became a viewer of some of the other *Portraits*. Second, each *Portrait* is itself in relation with all the other *Portraits*, thus creating something of a dance, or a chain of inter-relationships – something akin to Monet's late series of paintings (the Cathedrals, or the Waterlilies) with which, Tabouret herself enjoys a particularly close engagement.

But the most simple and basic way in which the artist's world is conveyed into her *Portraits* is that these portraits, each executed in the artist's studio, reflects, as she put it, daily life around her. The *Dramatis Personae* are the persons who inhabit Tabouret's life world, and who occasionally transit through her studio. The titles of each work refers to the subject only by her/his first name – alluding to the fact that the public persona of the individual has no bearing on her interpretation of them. Each person is introduced to us by her/his first name, immediately drawing us into the artist's inner and close circle: as viewers of *Portraits*, we instantly belong to the artist's world; we are one of them. This is not dissimilar to Courbet's own project as he was working on his monumental, and now illustrious: *The Painter's Studio*. Courbet pithily summarized his relationship to others wihin this vast painting by stating:

> *The world comes to be painted at my studio*.

These very words aptly describe what happens in Claire Tabouret's *Portraits.*

The audience and the artist:

As a result of the present, ambitious project, Tabouret's expectations of her audience are utterly different from the past**.** Her intimate knowledge imbedded in this series speaks to the deeply psychological resonance felt between two people who meet one another, face-to-face, (as we saw in the second paragraph, on "Duality"). As Carl Jung astutely put it:

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are being transformed.

These words are notably apt to suggest how such a mutual physical reaction, or transformation, can be felt as one engages with genuine portraiture – whether as the author (Tabouret herself) or as a sitter. And, this fascinating dual relationship brings in the viewers, as close witnesses of these strong interchanges, and, therefore, as participants ourselves.

Through engaging with her compositions we, viewers, gain access and knowledge of her perspectives, not only as an artist, but as an individual with strong insights and connections to those around her. Tabouret is able to impress upon the audience the subtle weight of expression and gesture that delivers something of the story of each person/sitter. Art history has repeatedly emphasized the voyeuristic nature of the gaze in traditional portraiture. Yet, Tabouret is able to turn this on its head, transforming the voyeuristic nature of the looking into a moment of connection that goes beyond superficial observations or surface understanding. There is a great deal of generosity, and warm energy going through the *world* of Tabouret's *Portraits.*

The audience and the subject: As we discern postures and attitudes, we subjectively conceive personalities for the individuals presented to us. This psychologically affects us, move us, stirs us – our spirits may be lifted or we may be drawn into a momentary bout of melancholy, surprise, joy, amusement – all the above, and more. Thus, here, the figures exist in a liminal space, outside of the concepts of time and space wherein they seem to change as we do – allowing us to endlessly speculate as to the inner and outer aura of individual. This constant mutability is quite evident at the heart of Tabouret's *Portraits*. In her presentation of the *other* there is a clear reliance on movement. It is impossible to deny the transitory mood which emanates from these compositions, as her painterliness lends a stirring capriciousness to even those figures which first appear to have a rather fixed demeanor. She does not resort to meticulous draftsmanship, but instead, relies on brushwork that is both deliberate and lyrical – reminiscent of Monet's innate application of paint. Tabouret has previously spoken to her fondness of Monet's *Grandes decorations*, (Orangerie) and the ensuing calm, spellbinding, sense of movement that emanate from his paintings – most palpable in those which feature water. As Steven Levine noted, Monet fully realized

the ambition that his painting speak not only to the eyes but also to the most delicate sensibilities and imaginations.

This is true too, of Tabouret's *Portraits*: the delicacy, immediacy, and looseness of Monet's strokes indelibly conveyed the world as it existed – constantly in flux and necessarily subjective. Our relationship to the work/the individual, thus, also remains in a transitory state. Moving past a painting by Monet, one is moved by a tenuous and faint, almost imperceptible, waxing and waning, where elements of the work seem to change in each, subsequent, encounter. Tabouret's subjects similarly command attention through the mesmerizing stares, while eluding facile or quick characterizations. In returning their gaze, we, the audience, oscillate between the role of observer and the observed. This is how Tabouret also conjures up what is ephemeral or magical between us - or *entre-nous*.

J Pissarro