

# THE PILL®

*Mudhoney*  
Jean-Charles Vergne

Painting, if it is to resurface unexpectedly, should be unassuming, allusive, memory-resistant, resonant, suffused with afterglow: outpourings and downfalls, at turns surging and burrowing, a weft of lights shining onto the paint and out from its organic core, and there is always the risk of achieving nothing but mud. The risk of mud<sup>1</sup> for Claire Chesnier is an ink-overload saturating the paper's physical capacity, leaving no room for touch-ups. She uses ink for her large-scale paintings, which in their size and verticality roughly match her own body. The surface of her paintings on paper is smooth, unruffled, bounded by its edges and rimmed by a frame – nothing ever spills over, nothing divulges the beginning or end of a gesture. The risk of mud implies the extinction of colour, swamped by itself and by the cumulative irreversible nature of hues: the unilateral submersion of colour through liquid layering; however, she attains that elusive realm where the sublime hovers at the margins of dereliction.

A painting is not an image. This might seem like a superfluous reminder, but is not self-evident for viewers, nor for what is being viewed. Painting is to be approached in terms of its ability to encroach – and even to destroy – the image it constitutes, in a simultaneous two-way motion of imaging and pulverising. In other words, a painting should stand at the threshold of its image and surpass it, so as to render it more fraught and ultimately more fragile, more daring, more vulnerable to fissure and collapse, the way dying stars collapse inwards under their own gravity. A painting should grapple with its own extinction. Claire Chesnier's paintings destroy the images from which they might originate, entail grazing the memory of expanses, of crepuscular skies, of indiscernible luminous limits, or of atmospheric modulations spun into abstractions due to an abstracting of the recollective process. Painting from nature or based on nature – *sur le motif* or *après le motif* – primarily and literally boils down to finding a motif to paint. This harks back to painting's detachment vis-a-vis the world, to the motif of the world as a mere motif, a mere premise for painting, and one could ramble on forever about dawn or dusk, about the rotting of wilted flowers and their decay into mud, at the end of the day all that remains is painting, the motif of painting, painting as motif.

A painting should not be narrative, it should not describe the world – it would thereby be an illustration whereas it inherently seeks for lustration, a purification of reality – evoking the original meaning and ritual of the word lustration. Painting also responds to a need for luxation, for separation and dislocation of the world, referring to reality by way of pure analogy, commodity or pretext. This analogy matters, as painting – however abstract it may be (yet isn't that its essence?) – must be able to trigger a reversal and form a polarizing filter on the world: having called the world as witness, it deflects towards a common assent about reality. Such is the outcome of William Turner's blazing sea-skies, Giorgio Morandi's tenaciously painted still-lives, Gilles Aillaud's zoos and animals, Raoul de Keyser's sports fields and weak landscapes, Etel Adnan's poetry-distilled expanses... These paintings call the world to witness, folding it like origami within the pictorial space, doing away with all narration and grip of words, enabling one's gaze to ultimately redeploy a poeticized, magnified, heightened world.

Painting offers the eyes an unexpected and overpowering encounter with colour. Encountering a colour is an event in itself – we've all experienced this, enthralled by a sky's dusky purple, a meadow's tender green, or a subtly flickering gaze. This event can be shattering in its sudden occurrence, to cite the renowned passage in Marcel Proust's *La Recherche du temps perdu* where the character Bergotte suffers a fatal stroke when he discovers a tiny detail in Johannes Vermeer's *View of Delft*: a "small patch of yellow wall". Event becomes advent in an unexpected irruption, utterly and irreversibly altering reality. Colour, "the place where our brain and the universe meet" as Paul Cézanne puts it, weaves a shattering intimacy with our gaze – an intimacy that is based on harmony as well as on interference, on consent as well as on harsh rupture. For William Turner, Giorgio Morandi, Gilles Aillaud, Raoul de Keyser, Etel

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<sup>1</sup> The expression is Claire Chesnier's.

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Adnan, as for Claire Chesnier, thought is intrinsically enmeshed with colour. Colour thinks. Claire Chesnier has set up a particular relationship, whereby her works derive from a reduction of the world – reduction used in the cooking sense, i.e. evaporating a liquid into a kind of quintessence –, whereby consent is given to colour as an event, as an advent, as an intensity that retrospectively kindles a sensorial perception of the world.

Claire Chesnier's ink paintings have an upwards atmospheric thrust in their overt abstraction, in their pigment density and liquid materiality. Their verticality displays bodily proportions and paradoxically veers towards the horizontality of a tremolo, streaking the paintings with striations of chromatic gradients. Two axes are superimposed – body axis and landscape axis – making it impossible to reconstruct the painting's phases. The recent paintings, which have more of a fibrous, corporeal and organic quality than those exhibited in 2020 at the Galerie ETC, are dawnings of abstraction, luminous apertures onto the unfolding of hazy spectrums. For each painting, Claire Chesnier jots down in private notebooks the colour values underlying the strata<sup>2</sup>. For instance, the annotated sketch linked to painting 010921 lists the following colours bottom to top: "indigo, dark purplish indigo, red anthracite, dark Sienna magenta, Sienna/burgundy, dark ochre, Sienna/red ochre, old yellow gold, silver/gold, blue grey, pearly white violet-pink, greyish white, pearl blue, yellow sea-green, pale sea-green blue, pearl cyan white". Over fifteen colours, recorded in a condensed form that never divulges the totality, the imperceptible alteration of hues, the evanescent shift from greyish-white to pearl blue. And notwithstanding its precision, this list can never convey how the ambient light is channeled. You have to live with one of these paintings to grasp its power of modulation, dawn to dusk, in sync with the arrhythmias of climate and tempo. The calendar entry comes across in the titles, 010921 indicating the day, month and year the painting was completed. Claire Chesnier's paintings embody and connect to the world's light through their chromatic versatility, their tendency to breed retinal persistence, to fluctuate, to vanish and reappear, to exude a halo. It all unfolds in the liquid layering, in how the water-drenched paper absorbs the multiple ink passages, their "pigments combining, attracting or repelling one another, settling like silt washed up by high tide" as Karim Ghaddab writes<sup>3</sup>. Claire Chesnier explains that any abstraction in her practice is *après-coup* or *malgré tout*, which is to say in retrospect or in spite of everything<sup>4</sup>. In other words, it's all about gesture, momentum, interaction with a fleeting substance that overflows the gesture, soaks the paper and gives rise to a "slender depth of colours and time"<sup>5</sup>, a veil one may enter, at once immersed and held at bay. This array of colours resembles shimmering water, chalky dermis, glimmering metal, and literally summons the viewer. The surface beckons one's gaze to plunge – after the deliquescent mud of time and creation, after the mingled colours have dried – into a stream of subtle chromatic variations of pictorial phosphenes, of slow tremors accompanied by fluctuating daylight. This may be abstraction, but an abstraction that does not detach or pry us away from reality and sensation: quite the contrary. In the words of Giorgio Morandi: "For me, nothing is abstract. I believe that nothing is more surreal, nothing is more abstract than reality."<sup>6</sup> To view Claire Chesnier's paintings is to ride on the wings of duration and light in the clasp of passing time and incarnated painting, bringing new meaning to the notion of viewing: a revelation of the perceptible sensorial world, an endlessly reiterated focus, bedazzlement, lucidity, a sequence of clairvoyance, withdrawal, loss, recovery – the way sight is recovered after transient blindness.

Extract from the text published in the catalog of the exhibition *mudhoney* / Claire Chesnier - Denis Laget, Galerie ETC Paris, January 6-March 13, 2022, curated by Jean-Charles Vergne.

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<sup>2</sup> The sketch is subsequent to the painting, not a preparatory sketch. These sketches have a memory value regarding the colours applied.

<sup>3</sup> Karim Ghaddab, "La grande image", in *Claire Chesnier*, Galerie ETC, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Claire Chesnier, online discussion between Claire Chesnier, Claire Colin-Collin, Karim Ghaddab, Romain Mathieu, ESAD Saint-Étienne, 18 février 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Claire Chesnier, *Fragments d'une déposition*, doctoral thesis in Fine Art and Art Sciences, Sorbonne Paris 1, 2018, to be published by Éditions L'Atelier contemporain, Strasbourg, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Morandi, interview recorded on 25 April 1957 for "La Voce dell'America".