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The big picture
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Claire Chesnier's paintings appear veiled. The layers of color they present to the viewer - as much as they propose them - seem less superficial than inhabited by a depth in which something seems contained. Like a fog that impedes the perception of a landscape, their densities seem to harbor images and configurations that, while not clearly perceptible, are nonetheless there, masked, covered, trembling at the threshold. In this way, they could be antinomical to painting as an art of surface and clear vision.

Or, these layers of color could be likened to monochromes, a category with which it's tempting to associate them, and with which they share several points in common: aniconism, the absence of drawing, even if abstract, the exclusive empire of color, all-over expansion... However, Claire Chesnier's painting is the exact opposite of monochrome. In fact, she is even further removed from it than she is from figurative painting. Firstly, it is the exact opposite of a monochrome, in the strictest sense: on the contrary, it is a proliferating polychromy, a chromatic frenzy that contains as many nuances, variations, details and local situations as a landscape painting. Secondly, unlike monochromes, these paintings have not eliminated the question of composition. Each of them has, without the slightest exception, a visible orientation, a top and a bottom, and their hanging is not at all indifferent.

Veils are present in the iconography of art history, from the topos of drapery to the public inauguration ceremonies of certain works, via carpets and hangings, sheets of honor and shrouds... But these are still veils that concentrate their action locally: in a precise zone of the image, the image is absent from itself. It is founded on its own disappearance or partial negation. A dialectical rift opens up, like a situated collapse of the general order, making continuity and rupture simultaneously beat to the rhythm of the ripples of a wind-swept abyss¹. But even more disturbing is the total veil that covers the entire image. Fog, half-light, blur and steam are a dead end to the gaze, or rather they confuse the eye and direct it towards purely plastic qualities: texture, color, transparency, gestural, etc.

Claire Chesnier's paintings measure between 158.5 and 172 centimetres in height and between 130 and 134 centimetres in width. The dimensions are therefore close, but not strictly identical. They are not determined by any principle that would have fixed them definitively. They are fields that are not delimited in advance by any decision, but are established in the time of making, according to the amplitude of the gesture. Not all painters work with the figure, but all work with their body, that is, according to the means of their own body and the extent of the material. Claire Chesnier's formats are on the scale of the body. This means that they maintain an intimate correspondence with both the painter's body and that of the viewer, a correspondence that is not mimetic as would be the proportions of a represented body, but one that relates movements and the surface surveyed in the lived reality of gesture. In this sense, the format is the stage delimited by the amplitude of the gestures inscribed on it. These paintings can perhaps be understood in terms of abstract anthropomorphism, insofar as no image in them evokes the body, yet they maintain a dialogue with it through a play of proportions. In fact, it's a question of trace and promise, as much as dialogue, as these three phases of the body are indissolubly intertwined in these rectangles of color: the effects of the artist's gesture, frontal dialogue with the viewer and the promise of a reduction and revelation to the simplicity of a body's proportions, as in the case of certain works by Tony Smith, Ellsworth Kelly or Robert Morris. Willem De Kooning, who was as indifferent to the "concept" of space as he was to its metaphysical or scientific resonances, preferred to confide in experience: "When I stretch out my arms along my body and wonder where my fingers are, that's all the space I need as a painter"². This is undoubtedly the source of the quality of presence of

¹ In heraldry, the abyss designates the center of a coat of arms.

² Willem De Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me", *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, vol. XVIII, no. 3, Spring 1951, pp. 4-8, reprinted and translated in *Écrits et propos*. Willem De Kooning, trans. Christian Bounay, *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris*, coll. *Écrits d'artistes*, 1992, p. 33.

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Claire Chesnier's formats, which could be described as medium-sized, neither small objects nor large, spectacular machines. They don't represent a body, but they are a sensitive, empirical testimony to it.

The perception of these paintings is conditioned. We approach them slowly, as if they were presences facing us on the wall. The sensation we first experience of these colorful fields operates like a call. Barnett Newman warned against an overly distanced gaze that would simply encompass the painting without taking the risk of confronting it: "There is a tendency to look at great paintings from a distance. The great paintings in this exhibition are meant to be seen up close"³. If you approach Claire Chesnier's paintings and look at them from the distance at which you would stand in front of someone during a conversation, or even from an even more intimate distance, you will discover no real trace of gesture, but will travel through modulated expanses of color, variations in density, flat depths, often strange vertical shadows in the central zone...

The effects are of course conditioned by the painter's hand, but they are not totally produced by it. They derive much more from the way, each time singular and unpredictable, in which the innumerable liquid layers meet and mingle. Pigments amalgamate, attract or repel each other, sedimenting like alluvium deposited by the surf after a great tide. In this slow process of deposition (Fragments d'une déposition was a title used several times by the artist⁴), the hand's grip loosens, becomes a caress and a flow, to let the color pour out and reveal itself in unexpected results.

Borrowing an expression from Marc Devade, Claire Chesnier evokes the "gesture of color" to underline her disengagement from and confidence in the material. The gesture of color is the setting in condition - both technical and subjective - of the sensitive expression of emancipated color⁵. "It is in the very gesture of color," writes Devade, "that painting is produced without the medium of imitation, which forms a screen to the reading of the material background of pictorial practice"⁶. Like Devade, Claire Chesnier used ink rather than paint between 1972 and 1978. The extreme fluidity of this material enables flat accumulations, several dozen layers passed through at different degrees of drying, playing with liquidity and transparencies. Just as a ceramist's glazes reveal themselves when fired, the colors born of this alchemy are always prepared and always a surprise. Mixing, absorbing, superimposing and drying produce an advent of color, a chromatic awakening, like an aurora. The extreme subtlety and minute variations are a challenge to the designation of colors, and reveal the appalling poverty of language in this field. "A bluish gray that gradually changes to a dark orange and violet"... This is the cruel infirmity of language in the face of a dawn.

The additive synthesis thus produced generate colors whose subtlety is irreducible to the pigments used. In this way, color unfolds its luxury, outstripping all discourse. "Where discourse presupposes knowledge," writes Devade, "the brushstroke advances only because it goes into the mystery, producing paintings that are so many songs of closed mouths reaching deep into the obscure. Before seeing, painting is a question of listening. From hearing to seeing: the understanding of painting. Because you only feel you're making progress when you almost don't know what to say or what gesture to make; when you're completely lost, in the dark"⁷. The synesthetic shift from one sense to another, "from hearing to seeing", listening to the painting, the oxymorons, the "songs of closed mouths"⁸, the "mystery", the disorientation evoke correspondences between different fields of experience that are also

³ Warning by Barnett Newman on a wall of the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, during his exhibition from April 23 to May 12, 1951.

⁴ Exhibitions at Espace Communes, Paris, 2018, Galerie du Jour agnès b., Paris and Marseille, 2012, portfolio of lithographs, Idem edition and Galerie du jour agnès b., Paris, 2012.

⁵ Morris Louis' Veils series, from 1958 to 1959, also comes to mind.

⁶ Marc Devade, Histoire-critique d'une peinture, Paris, Gérald Piltzer, 1975, p. 12.

⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

⁸ One of Devade's paintings, Peinture (1969), depicts the Chinese ideogram huà in the form of right-angled geometric lines, meaning "painting" and breaking down into secondary combinations: tián (field, cultivated land), kǒu (mouth, wound, opening), qiàn (hole), wéi (enclosure, encirclement). All these notions sketch out a dialectic of foreclosure and blossoming, a dialectic that lies at the root of painting.

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those of Claire Chesnier, on a daily basis: painting, music, movement, poetry, dance. Moreover, the vocabulary of classical dance evokes the operations at the heart of this painting: battement, fondu, écart, variation, jeté, glissé, chassé, enveloppe, temps levé... Claire Chesnier declares: "Not only does my lifelong relationship with dance inform something of my physical relationship with painting, but to tell the truth, I see painting as possible only in this absolute necessity of a gesture that moves forward and backward in the pulsation of a vital rhythm"⁹. This does not mean that clear and immediate transpositions are formalized between painting and dance, painting and music, painting and poetry, but that a very subjective sensitivity makes them echo each other. Practiced and lived in this way, painting does not close in on its technical and formal data - even if these are decisive - but opens up.

Claire Chesnier uses ink not on canvas, but on paper. Her supports are large sheets of paper drenched in innumerable liquid passages, which appear more tinted than painted, as the ink soaks the paper fibers. On close inspection, the initial liquidity of the color takes on a matte, downy appearance, while retaining its depth, as if ink and support were uniting in a new symbiosis. This use of ink on paper, as well as affinities with Devade's painting and thought, and an artist residency of several months at the House of Arts of Beijing in 2013, reveal the link between Claire Chesnier's work and traditional Chinese painting. At its highest level, the latter aims at the "big picture". This is obviously not a question of dimensions (here, as elsewhere, size doesn't matter), but of accomplishment in a painting's ability to combine the most particular with the most general, and to do so by entrusting itself to a kind of veil or mist that leaves part of the image in active suspense. The elements depicted remain deliberately not totally particularized. François Jullien explains that "this availability of the image, the one that makes the 'great image', makes them evasive to respect all the play of possibilities that animates them and makes them vibrate"¹⁰. Neither subservient to an imperative of external resemblance to a model, nor totally emancipated from it, such painting is about the in-between: breath, balance, threshold, beat. According to François Jullien, Chinese painting "would certainly not be satisfied with the sole coherence of painting with itself, responding only to itself, and prescribing to each element its modulation, as has become the case in modern (European) painting, particularly abstract painting"¹¹. While Claire Chesnier's painting has a definite heritage in the categories of Greenbergian modernism (abstraction, hard edge, flatness, all-over), she is not "content" with them either. Her "modulation" is a practice of gaps and echoes, of mingling and balancing, of opening and leaping.

The hegemonic reign of color dismisses drawing. Drawing exists neither through preparatory drawings nor through forms that would be visible on the finished painting. All form is evacuated. Claire Chesnier's work is entirely concerned with the expression of color. In this way, it absolutizes Cézanne's feeling that "pure drawing is an abstraction [...], everything in nature being colored"¹². For Cézanne, "nature is not on the surface; it is in depth. Colors are the expression, on this surface, of this depth. They rise from the roots of the world."¹³ Where line is an artifice, color is archaic, in the sense that it carries a primordial memory, an archaeology of the world. For Claire Chesnier, a relationship with nature is as essential as a visit to the museum, and the color sensation may come from a vision encountered by chance in everyday life: a sky, of course, but also a reflection in a puddle of water, the nuances of a dead leaf, the velvetiness of a fabric, a reflection in an iris... Joachim Gasquet notes such a relationship with nature in Cézanne, which in itself is nothing exceptional, but also a palette that tends to become both liquid and ethereal: "He dissects landscapes. The composition of the world appears to him. [...] a fluidity comes over him. His palette becomes clearer. The more he strengthens his inner self, the more his canvases become airy. The first blue caresses mingle with his shadows"¹⁴.

⁹ Claire Chesnier, « Le souci du pinceau », La Besogne des images, dir. Léa Bismuth, Mathilde Girard, Paris, Ed. Filigranes, 2019.

¹⁰ François Jullien, La Grande image n'a pas de forme ou du non-objet par la peinture, Paris, Seuil, 2003, p. 177.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 217.

¹² Léo Languier, Le Dimanche avec Paul Cézanne : souvenirs, Paris, L'Édition, 1925.

¹³ Joachim Gasquet, Cézanne, Encre marine, 2002, p. 272.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 303.

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The prerogative accorded to color over design can be traced back to the ancient quarrel over color, which reached its climax at the end of the 17th century. For the "Poussinists", design is equated with will, spirit and knowledge, while color is merely superficial seduction and, to put it bluntly, feminine affectation. For the "Rubenists", on the other hand, it is in color that true likeness and evocative power reside, drawing being merely a matter of vain virtuosity. The debate may seem very binary and obsolete today, just like the one that pitted abstraction against figuration in the 20th century, but by positing the terms of painting in clear-cut oppositional pairs, it enables us to see precisely how much more complex things are in the works themselves.

Abstraction is not as radical as it seems in Claire Chesnier's paintings. The chromatic range, transparencies and gradations produce sky effects that inevitably bring to mind those of Caspar David Friedrich, clear and cold, or of an evening morder. What happens in the painting is akin to atmospheric phenomena, nitescence rises, diaphanous mists, rainy subsidence in clouds, twilights and auroras... The titles of Claire Chesnier's exhibitions testify to this atmospheric quality: "L'aire des aurores" ("The aurora area" Le Patio Art Opéra, Paris, 2014), "Une réserve de nuit" ("A night reserve" with Estèla Alliaud, galerie Art & Essai, Rennes, 2019), "Le ciel aussi est un fracas" ("The sky too is a clatter" Galerie Etc, Paris, 2020). Color is access to the visibility of the formless and nameless: the depth of the sea, the expanse of the sky, light, reflections... From then on, the question of the external model is secondary. This is why, according to François Cheng, "the painter's gaze is turned inward, since after a slow assimilation of external phenomena, the effects of the Ink he elicits are no more than the nuanced expression of his soul"¹⁵. In the "big picture", the "gesture of color" and the artist's interiority are no longer distinct; they merge.

Like the seasons and the cycle of days, everything passes. What once stood out like a dazzling light gradually fades, the most established dogmas inevitably see their adherents cast into doubt, the revelation that was supposed to conclude a story reveals that it was just an episode. De Kooning explains his guilty attraction to representation as follows: "It's really absurd today to want to reproduce an image [...] with paint, since you have the choice of doing it or not doing it. But suddenly it occurred to me that it was even more absurd not to. So I'm afraid I have to obey my desires."¹⁶ If Claire Chesnier's painting is veiled, as we observed in the introduction to this text, it is undoubtedly also because she is in mourning. A veil always conceals something, and indicates what it covers as much as it conceals it. Claire Chesnier's spectrum of colors and the shadows produced by the nuances and transitions, like the importance of the body in this painting or its force of presence, cover a remanence of the figure. "There's a woman under there" is the famous revelation in front of the magma of shapeless colors in Frenhofer's painting, in Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* ("The Unknown Masterpiece"). In the short story, the young painter who comes up against - and is struck by - this presence obscured by the carnal impastos of the old master is Nicolas Poussin, the primary reference for those who favor drawing over color. Admittedly, Claire Chesnier no longer depicts the bodies she painted during her formative years, but they remain there, in the background, like ghosts haunting this painting.

The great technical skill required to apply color is never exhibited or claimed by the artist. The use of ink on paper tolerates no repentance, and this word must also be understood in its moral dimension. Nothing is erased, neither successes nor failures. What's done is done. No catching up is possible. Whatever direction color takes, we have to deal with it, even if it means trying to change it, but always taking full responsibility for what is, never denying it. Gesture and procedure cannot constitute an aesthetic criterion per se; they are the condition, but by no means the finality or the argument. Claire Chesnier's reticence to explain in detail her way of proceeding, and even more so to demonstrate it, borders on a workshop secret. It's not a question of jealously guarding recipes for fear of having them stolen, but rather of maintaining in a zone of discretion, as if in retreat, what is both foundational and anecdotal. This mystery is kept because it's not where the mystery lies. There is nothing demonstrative or

¹⁵ François Cheng, *Vide et plein. Le langage pictural chinois*, Paris, Seuil, 1991, p. 88.

¹⁶ Willem De Kooning, « Entretien avec David Sylvester pour la BBC », 3 décembre 1960, réédité et traduit dans *Écrits et propos*. Willem De Kooning, op. cit., p. 103.

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esoteric about this work. The difficulty must remain (and even become, through mastery) inapparent and not be exhibited as a tour de force.

Nothing ever appears that might reduce this work to a commentary on current events: no slogans - consensual or provocative - no depictions of migrant boats, no images of yellow vests or Notre- Dame in flames, just a lifting of color, between light and half-light. In this respect, Claire Chesnier's painting may appear disconnected from the "questioning of our times" conventionally demanded of artists, but it is precisely this apparent silence that gives it its authentically political dimension. A painting is the result of the sum of gestures and decisions that underpin its accuracy, and therefore its ethical significance.