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HERE WE SHALL MEET AND REMEMBER THE PAST

Conversation between Jean-Charles Eustache and Jean-Charles Vergne

Jean-Charles Vergne

Your life-path and the reasons that led you to painting are so uncommon, I can't help starting our conversation with these biographical details. They're not merely anecdotal, and in fact seem crucial as an inroad to grasping your paintings, both in terms of their subject matter and formal underpinnings – the small formats, the very smooth surfaces, the heightened attention to color.

Jean-Charles Eustache

I was born in a place called "La Retraite" in the commune of Baie-Mahault, Guadeloupe in 1969. In those days, it was a town covered with sugarcane fields. A small railway network would convey the sugarcane harvest to a weighing scale set up as a metal arch. The ruins glimpsed in *This Is the Way the World Ends* are the remains of a watermill that was part of the sugarcane processing. When I was still a child, this activity was already on the wane.

I lost the use of my right eye when I was just a baby, due to a cataract. A few years later, the damaged eye had to be surgically removed to get replaced by a prosthesis. My left eye has a low visual acuity – 1/10 and a half – and is monitored for glaucoma. My visual field is thus pretty disastrous. To compensate for peripheral vision, this eye is affected by acute strabismus, which can sometimes be disconcerting to those I'm speaking with. Being near blind was a serious challenge at school. I remember one of my teachers had me sit on the podium by her desk so I could follow the lessons next to the blackboard, but the attempt was unsuccessful. It was difficult relating to the other students and I fell behind... It was decided that I should be sent to a specialized facility in Clermont-Ferrand, in 1977; I was eight at the time.

That's how I ended up coming to Auvergne and living in an institute for the blind. Back then, integration policy wasn't as advanced as it is now. It's the reason why many blind or visually impaired children from Overseas France and other remote areas would find themselves as full-time or part-time boarders in this sort of establishment. I completed all of my schooling there. The institute's director wasn't at all in favor of my pursuing an artistic baccalaureate after tenth grade. So I opted for the literature stream, being a book lover. I'd managed to join the high-school newspaper, which was a small victory, as I was asked to do illustrations. In those days, there was no talk of inclusion, but it was deeply rewarding to take part in high-school life after having been cooped up by the institute's narrow framework. For reasons that elude me and which I prefer to ignore, that school continues to sow a weird nightmare that's been haunting me, out of the blue, for years.

I've always loved drawing, but I only had a skewed vision of what art and painting was – not something for me. If I could have been a comic book artist, that would have been seventh heaven. But in the 80s, comics were disdained, by the family milieu and even more so in the educational sphere, it was viewed as far too regressive! When I was a kid I remember hiding to be able to flip through comic books. The saddest part of the story is that I haven't been able to read a comic book for over twenty years. Now isn't that pretty ironic?

J-CH. V. How did painting find its way into your life?

J-CH. E. Painting only gradually appeared on my path. In small brushstrokes. First tiny ones, and then entire swathes. It's understandable that in an institute for the visual impaired, drawing lessons are rarely on the menu. We had teachers for piano, guitar, accordion or clarinet. Like most students at the institute, I also took piano lessons, in addition to learning Braille. I'd sum up the crux of their teachings as follows: touch the world with your fingertips, and then embrace it with your mind. Amblyopes (or the visually impaired) are in an awkward situation, since they can glimpse this world, and at the same time they're

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aware that the world they perceive is filled with gaps. The first painting I saw when I arrived in mainland France was a reproduction of one of Douanier Rousseau's jungles. Painting has always kept a distance from me – or perhaps it's the other way around? The awe experienced before a sacred inaccessible object. Nevertheless, throughout my childhood, I would see paintings by way of "interposed screens". At the institute for the visually impaired, I might come across a painting by chance: on a poster in the assembly hall (such as a Francis Bacon triptych that long intrigued me), or in a schoolbook reproduction – like those illustrations in Lagarde & Michard French manuals, or Vasarely images in scientific textbooks. In Guadeloupe, my parents had the brilliant idea of procuring the Robert illustrated volumes. I'd leaf through those books with rapture. So many strange universes, all those beaches, reefs or woods where my imagination could revel in new forms, astonishing proposals. I was gripped by certain vistas, but little did I imagine that some of those images harbored even more thrilling secrets.

I think it was in 1991 that I ventured one day through the doors of the FRAC Auvergne. There was an exhibition of paintings by Jean Dubuffet. I think that was the very moment I "saw" paintings "in flesh and blood".

J-CH. V. You're saying that the FRAC Auvergne is where you saw artworks for the first time in your life? We've known each other for years and I had absolutely no idea! What happened at that first discovery? Was it a kind of epiphany? Or to the contrary, did things happen with a sort of delayed effect? I'd also like to mention one of your personal traits, the particular way you approach and look at a work. Your disability compels you – I've often noticed you doing so over the years, in the FRAC's exhibition halls – to position yourself right at the surface of the paintings – two or three centimeters away, no farther – so as to look at them, and I'd even say to scan them, which seems to me the most apt term. Tell me something about this unusual way of browsing a surface.

J-CH. E. Actually, it was during a trip to Colmar, one year earlier, that I had the first opportunity to approach a work of art. It was the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald. But as you've pointed out, the only way for me to read a painting is to get really close up. Which is why that first experience was confined to deciphering the lower part of the panel depicting Saint Anthony tormented by demons. So I wasn't able to appreciate the anatomic subtleties of Christ on the cross, since the motif was too high up. I sort of remember experiencing this first contact as more literary than pictorial. I was more gripped by the depicted nightmarish vision than by the panel's pictorial features. The varnish covering that hellish apparition reinforced my notion of painting back then – images vitrified under the veil of brownish organic matter. So I broached the work from its literary angle (Flaubert with his Temptation of Saint Anthony, or Antonin Artaud whose *The Theatre and its Double* I'd just perused).

Paradoxically, if the altarpiece served as a kind of baptism, my first visit to the FRAC Auvergne could be defined as a kind of epiphany or "transfiguration", insofar as painting now revealed itself in its nuts and bolts – it became matter in its own right. In the early 90s, the FRAC was housed at the Écuries de Chazerat, which gave it a less intimidating feel for a curious onlooker of my breed. Not only were Jean Dubuffet's paintings displayed at eye level, but they offered me a spectacle that was totally new for me. If I think back to that afternoon, I recall a swirl of interlaced patterns. Some of the paintings swarmed with figures wedged in a chalky magma. It was fabulous, as until then I'd never seen such furrows etched right into the image. Those paintings enabled me to go from the simulacra of pallid bubonic flesh-tones of the Isenheim altarpiece to the pulsing flesh of incarnated painting.

That experience must have left its mark, because from then on I've been a devotee of art centers and museums, whenever opportunities have arisen. Patiently, I started shaping my gaze. For eight years, I pursued my passion by scrutinizing a very wide range of paintings, from Henri Fantin-Latour's stark backgrounds, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot's creamy landscapes, Henri Matisse's gleaming surfaces, or Francis Bacon's forceful projections. It was a sort of bulimia that I fueled by collecting postcards picked up along the way. As a neophyte, I stuck to impressionist and modern painting. Contemporary painting only beckoned later on. The Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon and the Louvre were my two favorite hunting

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fields. The virtues of keeping company with masterworks is no myth. For painting aficionados, visiting a work is as heartwarming as visiting a friend. Out of sheer gusto, in a single day I could go straight from a Paul Cézanne retrospective to a wing of the Louvre. I'm truly glad to have been able to contemplate the incredible finesse of Jean Siméon Chardin's small canvases. What I'm ultimately after when I observe a painting, whatever its origin and era, is its texture as well as its formal structure. I love trying to figure out how the paint was applied and then deployed on the canvas, layer by layer, section by section. I think I've always been fascinated by the coexistence of several elements in a single ensemble: the plurality of reading levels in a single story or the superposition of two or three stories. Before getting interested in painting per se, I adored comic book authors like Fred and his Philémon, or Bill Sienkiewicz and his Elektra saga... The irruption of different styles disjoints the narrative stream; the story's linearity is suddenly undermined by exogenous images or by a drawing style that is sometimes degenerate, and sometimes classicizing. Getting back to the subject of painting, that's why Raoul de Keyser's works grab the attention of painters. Raoul de Keyser shows how his creatures were devised, not just through the variety of his output, but by planting clues at the fringes. A way of painting that gives food for thought about its internal structure can perhaps be compared to a beautiful math formula. But it can also be viewed as crime solving – the metaphor might be trivial, but it's undeniably evocative, especially so ever since the democratization of scientific research. The proliferation of self-references within artworks is a case in point. So yes, I do have my own way of scanning, but hopefully with an eye that's still imbued with humanity.

However, although I grew increasingly impassioned about painting, I never actually thought I'd undertake art studies. It seemed like total madness. Then, upon the enthusiastic urging of one of my friends, I ended up overcoming my complexes and applying to the entrance exam for the Fine Arts department in Clermont-Ferrand. At the age of thirty, I told myself this was my last chance, even though a small voice inside me kept whispering the same old tune: "And what about your sight, kiddo?" "You're way over the hill" or even "You don't even have the necessary cultural background, what are you thinking?" If I'd known then that the other applicants had spent a year doing prep studies, my fears would have multiplied.

J-CH. V. Your painting has from early on been marked by the question of memory, in a practice mainly based on depicting landscapes on small-size formats. These landscapes are often warped by a kind of liquid disintegration of the surface, like a photographic film on which some of the gelatin has melted, obliterating specific zones of representation. We now know from neuroscience that the more we elicit a memory, the more it is subject to unconscious corrections, additions and removals, reframing and falsification. In other words, it seems as if our memories possess a limited amount of authenticity capital, and are doomed to disintegrate with increasing use. Between the visual obliteration of your depictions and the corrosive process that affects our memories, your painting seems to be fraught with the ineluctable decay of things, which is further underscored by the melancholy vein of your titles.

J-CH.E. This mechanism of memory's disintegration brings to mind sequences from a film I'm especially fond of, Frank Perry's *The Swimmer*, released in 1968. First of all, because it superbly illustrates that small theater where our memory plays out our recollections, often puffing them up; and secondly, because the story we're told is often bathed in a nostalgia-tinged atmosphere. The sun shimmering through verdant foliage, upon the watery surface of swimming pools, acts on the retina like the sizzling of an enchanted yet waning summer. A man, played by an aging Burt Lancaster, makes his way back home by diving into the backyard swimming pools that lie on his path, as if going upstream a river (of time). We soon realize that the pools provide opportunities for our modern-day Ulysses to exchange small talk with his neighbors. From dive to dive, the swimmer gradually comes face to face with a cruel unveiling. The water of the successive pools functions like the multiple baths used in photographic processing. And ultimately the final shot, a sort of Polaroid of our athlete's existence, is out of sync with how he views his condition. One of the film's most intriguing passages happens when he encounters, at the edge of an abandoned pool, a young boy – symbol of his childhood, probably. When the swimmer comes in contact with the boy, he encourages him to imagine swimming across the space that has been emptied of water,

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– and thus of memories. The film raises a notion that I viscerally connect to, i.e. that over the years, we experience a silent relentless affliction. An ailment that can be likened to a form of amnesia. To a certain extent, some of my paintings tend to underscore this terrible awareness, by means of layering – as is the case with *Octobre* –, or of disintegrating patterns – as with *Novembre*. The older we get, the more our capacity to summon memories grows weaker. We helplessly look on as our dead zones proliferate. Soon, names start fading from the picture, then faces vanish into a muffled void, and then sounds begin to merge into a dulled note, until ultimately smells dwindle away, without leaving a trace. And in this inexorable process of data washout, the visual aspect alas turns out to be the most brittle of all. So how are we to rage against this dying of the light of our memory, year after year?

Among the various routes I've explored, there is one that keeps surfacing: that of reverie. It's why I often draw on works or films that are set in childhood. Childhood's imagination is more supple, and poignantly, thrillingly, malleable. It conveys an imagination that can defy the spoils of time, sailing through the precipices of the white page of life yet to be written. Another of my favorite films highlights the way in which recourse to fantasy can fill in the gaps of memory. I'm referring to *Sundays and Cybele*, or *Les Dimanches de Ville d'Avray*, directed by Serge Bourguignon in 1962, and once again it's a child who comes to the assistance of a wanderer's failing memory through the power of imagination. So you won't be surprised that I'm drawn to the poet Jules Supervielle, or the writer Ray Bradbury. They delve into the subjects that matter to me, such as the absence, disappearance, and persistence of memory. Whether in seabed hollows or fluffy floating clouds, creatures or stateless entities vainly seek to recollect memories of the living. These ghosts dwell in our memories.

The technique of circumscribing a setting with multiple descriptions is not so far from the process used by Giorgio Morandi or Pierre Bonnard, two painters renowned for the bonds they forged with memory. As if applying several washings to a motif in order to extract the memory of color-hues – with the secret aim of perpetuating a fragment of landscape. In Giorgio Morandi's case, I was told that he'd suffered serious depression after joining the army in 1915. Confined to near total immobility, his only form of distraction was observing bottles on his bedside table, and gazing at the slow progression of sunrays upon the small array of objects in his room. You're there, lying in a bedroom, listening to an absent nature, intensely aware of the silent dance of dust-flecks bathed in morning light. Time permeates you; the impressions of that morning slowly infuse your memory. And then suddenly you realize that the light lures in its wake particles of memories. How to imprison those precious witnesses of a quarter of an hour, or an hour of your life? – that might be the question. This episode in Morandi's existence emits a Proustian scent. Here lies, I believe, one of the secrets of Giorgio Morandi's painting. On the other hand, I used to be convinced that all those notes Pierre Bonnard had jotted down were merely instructions of a practical nature, such as the impact of springtime glimmers on blooming almond trees, or how heavy clouds would cast their shadows on misty tree-groves. But nowadays, I wonder if they aren't also annotations of a memory hunter. Just as an entomologist would do. To meticulously detail the setting of a faded happiness, with the sole aim, in the manner of a Dr. Frankenstein, of reviving the most beautiful sparks of the past. I like to think that my hypothesis isn't that far from the truth. The fact that his wife preserves an eternal youth from canvas to canvas, despite the ravages of time, seems to hint at this. In my opinion, the rapport linking a photo of our past to our memories of it is rather tenuous; it hovers above the photograph like a rebellious shadow. That's why we might be better off, like these two artists, sticking to little things, signposts of everyday banality.

J-CH. V. The shifting of light on a wall and the notion of detail naturally bring the conversation to the paintings you began in 2015, wrongly viewed as a turning point in your practice from figurative to abstract, when in fact your painting has never sought for abstraction.

J-CH. E. In 2016, I had a show at the Galerie Claire Gastaud displaying several small paintings that were seemingly abstract. At the time, I was experimenting with a serial approach to a preset motif. As I recount in the exhibition's accompanying text, a personal experience prompted me to use the process of repetition. My aim was to devise variants of a motif as a way of catching dreams/memories. A clinical

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approach to seriality might jeopardize my original intent with this method. That's why I paid special attention to preparing the color-tones. I'm referring to the constraint I'd deliberately chosen during my studies at the École des Beaux-Arts. Back then, one of the works that as students we especially admired was Jean-Marc Huitorel's *The Rules of the Game / The Painter and His Constraints*. Not only did the cult of color cult reverberate like a dogma in our ateliers, but many of us were also fascinated with protocols of implementation. I'd add that the *modus operandi* of artists such as On Kawara and Luc Tuymans had a strong impact on me. A painting a day was a concept that struck me as a daring feat! By the same token, I was drawn to the challenge of painting with a palette limited to three primary colors, plus white. This precondition turned out to be invigorating, as it echoed with the scale of seven notes. By starting out with a constraint, you attain a sort of demiurgic power that can be very fulfilling. It also involves a form of asceticism, which helps you focus on each project with humility.

Coming back to the small wood-panel paintings, although I was aware of there being an unknown element in this visual venture, I was far from imagining that undercurrents of reverie had spun through the cells of these seemingly controlled paintings. Nuances that had long been dormant inside the folds of my memory now resurfaced, overturning the rules of the game. My surprise came from the source of the color-shades. I had a feeling that the chromatic range of the seemingly abstract small paintings of the series "Area" were rooted in the undergrowth of childhood memory. This chromatic spectrum draws inspiration from the color of the walls and the floors when I was a kid. Even before the "Area" series, Volume had accentuated the sculptural aspect of a crumpled sheet of paper. Plaster seemed the most apt material for transposing this dialogue between shadow and light with smoothness, and into three dimensions. I therefore fashioned several volumes with a distilled structure. My intention was to correlate them with the paintings. Scattered about in stark daylight, the structure of these elements had to evolve, over the course of hours, somewhat like sundials. For the series "Area", I'm aware how ochres, pinks and sea-greens denote the ultimate site of dreaming – the bed. The colors of that makeshift vessel for dreams and nightmares is also where beautiful journeys unfold – the ones born of reading. They're residual colors that flirt with those from a much older painting, which with hindsight was a seminal painting, *Sous le lit*, made in 2004. It shows a side view of a bed, under which lies an object that might be a box. It is the prototype of infirmary beds, or of the dormitory beds in my boarding school. The colors of the bedspreads were predominantly brown, pink, sea-green or grey. Colors that stand for safeness, and especially for my escape valve. If there is an ideal site for dreaming, meditating, observing and savory reading sessions, it was right there. It's also a great lightning rod with which to entice memories, because they're so close to dreaming, I guess. "The form of a city changes faster, alas, than the human heart." If you scratch away the romantic varnish from that line from Charles Baudelaire's *Le Cygne*, doesn't one glimpse the charcoal black of melancholy? My recollection of this poem is what prompted me to invert the claim that we're haunted by our memories. What if it were the other way round, and we're wandering phantoms dragging bundles of memories, and we're the ones to haunt our childhood sites by trying too hard to bring them back to life? That's why dreams take up so much space. At the end of the day, dreams aren't what fade; we're the ones who fade from our memories. And painting is a bit like learning to vanish, to fade. The image that decays, the vision that dissolves, the motif that shrinks by way of erosion or layering, it isn't a memory petering out, but a memory absorbing us under the wings of time. Regarding the titles of the paintings and their melancholic overtones, most have been culled from poets such as Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath or W. B. Yeats. Poets who, brandishing their torches, guide us through the darkness.

J-CH. V. You've alluded to the painting *Sous le lit* made in 2004 shortly after you graduated from the École des Beaux-Arts, underscoring its seminal aspect. I chose to feature it at the very end of the book, as quite unexpectedly, your recent paintings from 2020 trigger a return to the beginnings of your oeuvre. The brushstroke thins out again, the chromatic range reemphasizes the dominant brown of your early stages. Even the subject matter seems to reverberate, in a nostalgia or melancholy that is even more intense, with a heightened awareness of tiny things, random items arranged in compositions that become increasingly fragmentary and disjointed.

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J-CH. E. The resurgence of ochres and purples on my palette derives from the series "Area". As of 2013, I started wondering about the legitimacy of certain colors, especially greens. The triptych Murs was supposed to pacify drawing, so that I could reflect more deeply about the choice of colors. As a matter of fact, looking back, I see how the theme of construction resurfaces whenever I experience a need to consolidate my work. For instance, years later, Octobre and the triptych Murs draw inspiration from the same section of concrete-block wall. The image of the wall is not in itself an obstacle, but rather an opportunity to reexamine the motif, the DNA of colors. This explains the initial chromatic modulation in the paintings dating from 2014 like Shadows of Prophecy, with its patch of greenery verging on blue. The selection of color-shades then evolved, as can be seen in 5 Lines, Volume or Piece.

My recent paintings reconnect with a more poignant figuration, but capitalizing on my prior chromatic research. Like an animal returning to inspect the borders of its terrain, I delve back into familiar subjects, but with new perception and sharpened senses. Among my hobbyhorses, one arose while reading Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*. It involves the thorny issue of the limit of perception. In this book, Stephen King writes about a rumored ending of Roger Corman's film *X: The Man with the X-ray Eyes*, released in 1963, in which Ray Milland enacts Dr. Xavier's nightmarish descent into hell after inventing sensational eye drops that increase his vision, enabling him to see through clothes, bodies and walls. He is convinced that further experimentation with this invention will let him see what man had never been able to discern. And then the inevitable happens: like Icarus expelled from the heavens after coming too close to the sun, Milland is compelled to gouge out his eyes, so unbearable is the horror that defiles his vision, even with his eyes shut. The rumor that Stephen King alludes to is that Milland, after his self-mutilation, shouted "I can still see!", and that Roger Corman chose to leave this last line out of his film, deeming such a conclusion unsustainable. How not to be horrified before such a mind-blowing viewpoint that unleashes a swarm of question marks? What do we really see of the surrounding world? And how do we perceive it? Is it more important to see what lies beyond a stretch of wall or what gravitates at its edges? Shouldn't we be more concerned with whatever moves outside of our visual range? A seemingly trivial detail might turn out to be crucial. And we are never sheltered from the slithering of a phenomenon that has the capacity to surprise and enchant us. It may take the shape of something monstrous or incongruous, as in David Lynch's films, yet it may also materialize in a comforting, soothing guise. That's why what happens on a painting is as important to me as what hovers nearby – and I don't just mean what's right next to it, but also its psychological and emotional proximity.

In the past, I wanted my paintings to act like perennial ivy, spreading their offshoots within the viewers' minds. But nowadays, all I wish for is to spark off in them other images. Images with which they can continue on their way, and in their pockets, a small book of poetry slightly worn at the edges...