

La belle revue

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Translated by Anna Knight

First and foremost, the title. “Non-figurative: a revival of interest?” is the name of the exhibition that was held at the CAC Meymac from last 10 July to 16 October. As its name indicates, it was a collective exhibition presenting non-figurative paintings by around fifty international artists. However, the two parts that make up the title do not fail to intrigue, and above all, the use of the term “non-figurative”, deliberately preferred to that of “abstraction” to describe the nature of the paintings shown here. Beyond the ambiguity that has always existed between “non-figuration” and “abstraction” in art and the difficulty of being able to clearly differentiate them, bear in mind that “non-figurative” art refers to a specific pictorial movement that emerged in the mid-1940s in the wake of the Ecole de Paris. Deeming that abstraction defined their art too restrictively, a group of artists notably led by Jean Bazaine, Alfred Manessier, and Roger Bissière developed the idea of a non-figurative art that guaranteed a new relationship to the world and to nature. According to them, at the time, abstraction was the equivalent of a dogma whose practice was governed by a number of rules, both formal (systematic recourse to geometry) and theoretical (painting as pure intellectual speculation, basically), which they were thus refusing to submit themselves to. Not that the use of this “post-war” term disqualifies the message of the exhibition from the outset, but it must be concluded that it introduces it in a relatively disconcerting way and that it no doubt fails to serve the artists shown here as best it might. As for the second part of the title, it states the hypothesis that the two curators were developing throughout the exhibition, which postulates, prudently (hence the question mark) and “based on concordant but tenuous clues,” that non-figurative (or abstract) painting is currently enjoying a revival of interest. Once again, we may be excused for being a little surprised to learn that

the abstract painting developed over the past forty years¹ *has not been considered interesting*. The thought of the two curators is not perhaps expressed in such radical terms, but the idea nonetheless remains the same, and it seems difficult to defend². Let us wager, then, that the idea of this renewed interest is twofold, that it contains both a “qualitative” aspect (which is debatable) and an institutional side. In this sense, it is more than a hypothesis and becomes an observation (real, this time) since it is true that in recent years, abstract painting in its most contemporary expression has been the subject of major exhibitions in prestigious museums³. On the other side of the spectrum, the market continually confirms the good health (financially, but not exclusively) of abstract painting, whose over-representation in the galleries and on stands at contemporary art fairs has also been accompanied by some strange phenomena of “zombification”⁴.

Now for the exhibition. No zombies here, but a series of paintings whose distribution over the full five levels of the beautiful Saint André Abbey corresponds to as many thematic subdivisions, with each floor linked to a specific pictorial movement or at least to a specific period in the 20th century history of abstraction⁵. Going up one floor of the building to the next follows a principle of temporal classification: Constructivism and Geometry; Lyrical Abstraction; Abstract Expressionism (gestural period) and Informal Art; Abstract Expressionism (Color Field movement) and Minimalism; and Post-Modernity, with the final floor acting as a kind of synthesis of the overall exhibition. The curators’ orientation obviously contributes to a concern for pedagogy and clarity that it is important to acknowledge, and which proves highly judicious in places. However, a choice of artworks naturally stems from this procedure (give or take a few exceptions) offering only a very restricted panorama of this type of painting as it is practised today, by omitting the kind that, specifically, does not yet fall within these traditional divisions. There is an element of prudence here too, this time consisting of bringing each production within a pre-existing model: in short, preferring to rely on established and, in some sense, reassuring categories, rather than invent new ones. As a result, this indexation produces the risk – unfortunately, frequent – of illustration, and an assuredly reductive approach to certain practices by annihilating their inherent specificities. This is the case for Francis Baudevin’s *abstraction trouvée* [found abstraction], David Malek’s reflexive and cosmic paintings, or the programmatic and process-based practice of Bernard Frize, with each of his artworks presented as though evacuated of their theoretical substance. Therefore, by choosing to exhibit mainly immediate and laconic paintings⁶ or by choosing to avoid giving the more chatty works a voice, the exhibition ill-advisedly accomplishes the program announced by its title, by adopting the somewhat narrow ideas of the members of non-figurative art. The fact remains that submitting a hypothesis to the spectator is still one of the most beautiful ideas any exhibition curator can have. Regardless, in fact, of whether you agree or not.

Notes

1. The text of the exhibition newspaper stops its history of abstraction in the 20th century with Supports/Surfaces, apparently implying that nothing important has happened in the field of abstract painting between the disbanding of the group and the present day.
2. Rather than playing along with the fastidious game of the list, let's mention the summary written by the famous art critic and exhibition curator Bob Nickas *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting* (Phaidon, 2009). While the exhibition seems here to continue to doubt the legitimacy of contemporary abstract painting somehow, the work of Nickas opposes to it a kind of unwavering belief as well as a profound knowledge that makes him one of its most ardent and brilliant specialists.
3. Among these, let's cite one of the most recent and significant: "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World" held at the MoMA of New York in 2015.
4. Based on the expression "zombie formalism" formulated by American critic Walter Robinson (http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184). Idea reworked and developed by his colleague Jerry Saltz who, without totally disavowing it, deplores the standardisation of this new *decorator-friendly* and falsely cerebral abstraction (<http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html>)
5. An idea actually not so far from the one developed by the discussed exhibition at the MoMA of New York under the term "a-temporality".
6. The exhibition newspaper, talking about the artist of today: "(S)he aims to recover the conditions of an essential proposition, freed of figures and their wordy connotations that bog down our sensibility, an interplay of primary sensations disconnected from references or immediate concerns, between sensitive reaction and intellectual pleasure."

Non figuratif, un regain d'intérêt ?

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http://www.cacmeymac.fr/spip.php?page=expositions_detail&id_article=376



