

## In a Silent Way

François Barré

Being neither an art critic nor a historian, I shall express here the opinion of the visitor and the amateur –one who enjoys– perceiving the scope of territories and forms of beings as the encounters and exchanges dictate, and in so doing nurture and consolidate myself. I shall not therefore undertake any scholarly or structured analysis of the meaning, origin, affiliation and place of Yves Zurstrassen’s oeuvre on the art scene. Instead and in a rather unstructured manner, I shall attempt to recall here several impressions and emotions, pleasures and questions.

### Emerging from a Dream

We have art in order not to die of the truth. – Nietzsche

Yves Zurstrassen virtually began his life as a painter – he was only twenty at the time – long before setting down to work, following a “Cretan dream” filled with a precious substance, light and colour, which he carried like an expectation and an answer to a question that had not yet been asked. He was to have the feeling of embodying this vision ten years later, stating about his latest paintings (1986-1996): “They are the transcription of a dream, a waking dream. But when I work, I never think; everything is subconscious. [...] The dream is like a parallel life, a sort of visual premonition [...], as if someone were filming my movement throughout my lifetime.”<sup>1</sup>

In “Saint Peter’s Denial”, Baudelaire enigmatically wrote: “As for myself, certainly, I would be satisfied to leave. A world where action is not sister to the dream.” There are numerous exegeses explaining the distinction, identified by Baudelaire, between the *natural dream* and the *absurd dream*. “Unlike Gérard de Nerval, Baudelaire is little concerned with painting *the outpouring of dreams into real life* but is instead mindful to separate dream from reality and to see them as two separate worlds.”<sup>2</sup> Probably every creator experiences this separation. How and why should it be abolished? How can we “retain the dream whilst eliminating sleep?”<sup>3</sup> or harness it so as to detach it without betraying it and then tame it, before placing it in the world? These lives, of action and dream, sisters advancing along parallel paths without ever meeting up, share the same impulses and reasons and aspire to a destiny, a conquest so that finally art will no longer be the accomplishment of a dream, but will open up to supreme freedom from dishonesty.

### The Evidence of Making

I awake in the morning with a secret joy; I behold the light with a kind of rapture.

For the rest of the day I am content. – Montesquieu

“By lending his body to the world, the painter changes the world into paintings,” wrote Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>4</sup> Zurstrassen experiences painting through a physical engagement with each instant, just as we might hurl ourselves into something or get carried away. This was true even of the earliest stages of his work, which could be described as lyrical. There is a power, a solarly within him, a receptiveness to light, to be penetrated by and to radiate it. Thus he establishes a context, through complicity with the heavens that the light has travelled across. He perceives lights just as other, meticulous

1. Most of the citations –except where mentioned otherwise– are taken from an interview with Yves Zurstrassen by Claude Lorent during an exhibition at the Galerie Vedovi in Brussels in 1996. In Claude Lorent, *Zurstrassen*, Brussels, Artgo, 1996

2. Marc Eigeldinger, “Baudelaire et le rêve maîtrisé”, in *Romantisme*, Revue du dix-neuvième siècle, volume 7, *Mythes, rêves, fantasmes*, 1977

3. Paul Claudel speaking of Arthur Rimbaud in a letter to Henri Clouard, in Henri Mondor, *Rimbaud ou le génie impatient*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’Œil et l’Esprit*, Paris, Gallimard, “Folio/Essais” collection, 1985

people speak of latitudes. In his painting he knows how to express the North and the South, gentleness and violence, in a tumultuous time sequence.

Colour – for colours are light – contributes to his connections and constructions. The gesture and its scope, this light and these colours then converge in his canvases, along with the ever-present music and what we could call an aptitude for happiness. The paintings from the 1996 exhibition, often consisting of vast tracteries that overlap and answer to one another, form great, abstract landscapes – pure pleasure without representation – caught up in a circling movement which brings about transparencies, fusions and effusions; it is the pleasure of the exultant, radiant, Dionysian body. We find here an *endlessly-renewed* flood of choruses, repeated time and again, an absence of centrality, giving the details power and utter autonomy, hidden depths which nevertheless show through and dazzling surfaces, which appear to lead inwards, to an inviting interiority. If we are then reminded of Willem de Kooning, it is because he wrote, “Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented.”



96 12 28, 1996  
220 x 270 cm  
Oil on canvas

This stage of passion and training oneself requires a boundless longing and fondness for close contact. Before the grand tour, one has to make family visits and learn geography. As a self-taught experimenter, Zurstrassen does not fear great trees. He knows how to love and knows his ancestors, siblings and cousins. Thus he can be himself and invent himself in daily effort and pleasure. “My work places me more in the continuity of my own experience”. The commitment is intense and continuous, resumed each day in the early hours and undertaken until the evening in the protected space of his studio, the space of all dangers. A few succinct titles, “Fragments”, “Variation”, “Ouverture”, “Décollage”, “Rêverie” and “Jazz” previously used to qualify the finished works. For a decade or so, the title has become the date, as the hours and days pass in one, long almanac. He has produced more than one thousand works to date, in a search pursued to exhaustion. The messenger becomes the message and the painter the painting. Which one leads the other in this race and with what deliberation, what intoxication? There is no search for models or protectors; there is no circle or cenacle. Zurstrassen works alone, having neither the taste for heading off in search of some kind of respectability nor for pointless, irritating social engagements. All in all, “To speak too much is to overwork.” Music accompanies and nurtures his work from the outset. It is an abstract source which does not summon up any story and makes us discover repressed emotions; it irrigates and hybridises the pictorial work just like pollen from a nearby plant. In 1913, Apollinaire had foreseen its modern role: “We are moving towards an entirely new art which will stand, with respect to painting as envisioned heretofore, as music stands to literature.”<sup>5</sup> Schoenberg, who managed to be both a musician and a painter, wrote to his friend Kandinsky: “Clearly the gestures, colours and light have

5. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Méditations esthétiques : Les Peintres cubistes*, 1913, texts presented and annotated by L. Leroy, C. Breunig and J.-CL. Chevalier, Paris, Hermann, 1965

been treated here like sounds: music has been made with them." Zurstrassen creates painting that abounds with musical offerings. In the vocabulary of music, we can find terms which have a connection with painting: resonance, tempo, tonality, colour, reverberation, phrasing, form and movement. This is not such a pointless exercise, for music is omnipresent in Zurstrassen's work, even at the moment of painting. At this instant it disappears and only lives on through the act it has prepared and which is accomplished in silence. But the slow, ritual, "hand-crafted" ascent of the preparation (stretching canvases, preparing the colours) preceding this culmination then transforms the studio into a soundscape and fills it mainly with contemporary music: repetitive music reminiscent of a trance, free jazz, concrete music, intervals, silences and vibrations.

### The Conquest of Identity

Only those who must conquer them every day deserve freedom as well as life. — Goethe

An artist's oeuvre, the identity through which he expresses individuality, is the result of a long journey that initially opens up several routes, which are visible and have sometimes already been travelled. Along the way, the daydreams will be those of a solitary wanderer; then as time passes and the journey progresses, the pace, determination and expression will form the imprint of a single person. Each has their own way to reach this point, accompanied by their doubts and conquests. Zurstrassen follows his path, speeding up the process as much as he can, at each new stage. "I am more of a marathon runner, I have stamina and I recover quickly so as to go on and succeed." One day, when a friend of Braque was contemplating an unfinished canvas, he asked the artist, "But where does this light come from?" Braque searched out one of his older canvases and pointing to it, replied, "From here." For sometimes one has to go back a long way to understand a filiation, to tie up the threads, to learn from works that have been left unfinished and yet have been preserved. A future may have run aground here, an origin may be waiting to be perceived. "I often return to viruses I haven't cultivated,"<sup>6</sup> says Zurstrassen. Nothing is undertaken in vain; every experiment counts, even if it is a transitional moment; every addition, be it a retreat or an injury, contributes a new asset, perhaps a resolution. The identity is forged over the long term and even the most skilful colourist passes through the blinding effects of shadow. "The great wealth of experience of black and white revealed my identity to me." The first commitment, to abstraction, arose scarcely as a choice, such was the power of its self-evidence and presence in painting and the art of its time. "When one does not represent things, a place remains for the divine," proclaimed Mondrian. Zurstrassen first perceived this sublimation in a state of exultation: "A life in which everything is permitted, where I can feel everything, live or have the impression of experiencing all ecstasies." This utter freedom to constantly question the totality, ethics and aesthetics of painting literally signifies what the dictionaries state: "the absence of slave status". The magnificent canvases from 1986-1996 were not so much an outpouring of something innate, but were already constructed. Their evolution announced today's discoveries and the progressive approach towards a territory. They also revealed a virtuosity that can sometimes operate alone. The desire to create which leaves the body unrested, the pleasure and jubilation draw certain artists into a never-ending spiral, hastening the creator into reproduction and stability. This was in

6. Interview with François Barré, September 2009

no way the case for Zurstrassen, who knows how to remain defiant through silence and slowness: "I am suspicious of my states of lyricism. [...] I paint in oil with rapid movements. The execution may be fast but the process which leads to each canvas is slow. [...] In order for the painter to be able to consider his own painting, he has to distance himself from it and it takes a long time to win it over, as though it were a person. Our entire current system is opposed to this." His attention to the evolution of his work and his own potential knowledge of it is also a drawn-out process. It requires a distance which comes at the moment when imperceptibly a cycle is completed. It is then possible to interpret what is ending but is unfinished and to enter into a new sequence. The question of freedom is posed each time. "If everything is permitted, nothing is permitted."<sup>7</sup> Even in the passion, in the *free* of jazz or in the *action* of painting, it is therefore important to distinguish what it is that unites freedom and creation; a rigour, or at least a talent. One has to state one's rule in order to place one's bet.

### The Hidden Dimension

Form is simply content brought to the surface. — Victor Hugo

In order to go further "to find new grids," as Dubuffet said, Zurstrassen has managed to preserve the irruptive force of his painting and his gesture by combining it with new procedures that bring time and vision into dialogue in a unique hybridisation. He has managed to preserve the translucences of layers of colour and concealments, the contrasts and complementarities of colours, the revealed depths and the light touches on the surface. Previously, this relationship of what is seen and what is glimpsed left the painted unit whole and formed part of a historic continuum. When he took scissors to cut out forms in paper and stuck them onto the canvas, we might have been forgiven for still believing in this continuity or making references to the cubists and Matisse. This was in no way the case, as the piece he cut out was affixed onto what had already been painted and in the subsequent execution was then covered by further coats of paint. At the end, the removal turned into a revelation, divulging some forgotten, illicit possession, an irruption no longer from the passionate gesture but from burial, brought into the light, a discovered form, a future anterior space/time. Upside down, it reveals undersides which suddenly and without hierarchy gain the upper hand, trapped time when the last to appear is not the last to be painted. A new population moves in and inhabits the painting, introducing surprising, chance or random effects there, arranging itself on a sieve, a grid of forms and making signs there. The underlying and surface strata create a depth of field (an almost symbolic verticality), a flow and ebb (an almost symbolic horizontality), an interpenetration and a complexity. Apparent disorder is combined with hidden order.

Whilst these cut-out forms are not a representation or figuration, they nevertheless bear witness to an incursion into Zurstrassen's painting. They belong to a sequence of exogenous apparitions that illuminate and introduce everyday or legendary elements, grids or decorative forms seen in architecture or during walks in the city, evoking memories and familiarity. Then his approach became more radical – for scissors meant that his hands were still speaking – through a recourse to computer technology and the stamping of paper. This encounter brought about a real change in the nature of the painter's work.

7. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Ironie*, Paris, Flammarion, "Champs" collection, 1964

Accumulating a heritage of signs gleaned from catalogues and databases, or photographed with his mobile phone, Zurstrassen took possession of a disparate vocabulary commensurate to the cultural diversity of our world. But he still had to discover how to transform this heteroclitite inventory into a language, a living paste – painting – and thereby occupy a virgin territory. At the same time as this evolution, the painting became fragmented through the addition of more or less geometric forms, of white on black or of colour, and later through the division of the canvas into separate parts, creating continents and archipelagos or even constellations made up of signs and mazes, almost always with a background painted in its primary expression of colour and form. This hybridisation and its expression are exceptional and although like Harald Kunde we may find proximities and affinities with the contemporary American painters Philip Taaffe, Christopher Wool and above all Jonathan Lasker, none of them combine all of Zurstrassen's construction elements. As we can see from his *grid paintings*, he is determined to introduce into the painter's precious work and into an art that belongs to a complex history something of the intensity of a society traversed by other expressions and communications, those of patterns, standards and familiar signs shared by everyone. This is not the work of an erudite folklorist, but instead that of a creator who is sensitive to what returns, passwords, legendary airs and signs of life, one who develops a current, timeless, shared language. When Bartok set off in search of folk music and when jazz adopted them, transforming them each time with unforgettable standards, when today's young artists revisit urban folklore that invents gestures and languages, it is the same impulse, the same otherness, the same imperious desire for exterior times and spaces, machines generating surprises, party lights and obstacles in order to play and jump better. Snatches of memory, the writings of a never-ending palimpsest come and leave a trace and life anew in a world of hospitality.



A Beautiful Day, 2009  
Gare de l'Ouest, Brussels (BE)

In 2009 with *A Beautiful Day*, Zurstrassen pursued and reinforced this presence of multiple worlds in which we live and make our way. On an area one hundred metres long and four metres high in the Gare de l'Ouest underground station in Brussels, he installed a work composed "of easily manageable signs." Offered to the gaze and delectation of all, it brings about and engages in an exchange. The exercise of painting has scarcely changed over the centuries, both in terms of the nature of the workspace and the materials and colours (irrespective of their chemical, acrylic and other evolutions), and the gestures of the artist have been handed down with no great variations. We are all familiar with vast, superbly equipped studios. But in Zurstrassen's there is a twofold identity, through the combined expression of a high-tech production place and the presence of specialist assistants on the one hand, and in the silence and enclosure of the painting space and time on the other, suddenly abandoned solely to the forces

and chaos of creation. We find here the factory and the cloister. This duality reflects his choice to introduce into painting the plurality of the signs of our world and its polysemous dimension, through the supreme mediation of painting and abstraction.



91 10 02, 1991  
195 x 150 cm  
Oil on canvas

But it is also the story of two lives, both residing in the sanctum and the person of the painter; two temptations of life, espousing, rejecting and magnetising each other. The one is reminiscent of the torrent or the mountain and the other the power of models and their circulation. Can we tie the two together, draw up and weave them into a singing, dancing pictorial body? Should we fear in itself this abundance of vigour and this energy or reject this flood of classified motifs placed in reserve? Does the dream, this glimpsed flood, recognise itself? Does the freshness irrigate what is ordered? Zurstrassen offers us the magnificent proof of the success of this venture, which is possible because it is always uncertain, but blazing with power and invention. The fragility in itself has to be preserved, as it alerts and stimulates the marathon runner. "My best years are to come... There is a fire inside me. Everything remains to be done."<sup>8</sup>

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8. Interview with François Barré, September 2009