

Painting, Milonga, Day and Night

“All a poet has for himself, with himself, is time.”

Georges Perros

For certain painters painting entails learning exacting rules, learning compositions and styles, and, paradoxically, asserting the greatest freedom at the same time.

This freedom is not an a priori principle, but a precisely constructed space. Through a knowledge of art history, an engagement with the creativity of the century, a mastery of gestures, a play of forms and their formation into a work, the space itself without any phrases makes me experience this active freedom.

Yves Zurstrassen is a painter of such freedom. His wager is that the deepest possible knowledge of the great works from the days of De Kooning, Twombly, Richter and Polke, for example, can be a pathway toward the shedding of a reductive ego amidst of the pictorial flux, explored and traversed to reach painting alone, and to fully become its subject.

Like the Italians, Zurstrassen practices a “rifare.” He *redoes* just as the Renaissance, Baroque or Mannerist painters redid the works of the masters they had chosen, in order to strip themselves

of any biographical complacency and gradually abandon, through

this “rifare,” the forms of knowledge that had supported but constrained them, so as finally to generate their own style — pulling away at the same time, in full self-awareness, of the history that had formed them. Zurstrassen’s work scouts out a territory in order to consciously trigger the step beyond that lets even self-awareness slip away, opening the doors of an experience whose meaning is a complex quest for the freedom of forms.

What then do finally see? First an extreme independence of both figures and surfaces, an adjunction of dissimilar and opposite qualities, an agitated arena where quotations mingle with original expressions. Each painting is fragmented, transparent or opaque, moving at the rhythm of “collages” and contradictions.

In the same work, we shift from a style plunging us back to the mid-twentieth century or the 1970s, to other points where we dialogue with the most recent New York painting. Zurstrassen plays with all that, with the greatest independence and above all, the greatest pleasure. The important thing is to go deep enough into

the game in order to lose track of the rules. It’s not an exercise but a poetic act that consists in calling *everything* back to oneself, as with the Baroque artists or certain contemporary poets, so that the space springs to life with all of painting’s possible incarnations, along with all the different kinds of virtuosity they imply. To look at one of Zurstrassen’s pictures is to become the actor of this sovereign poetics where we move without hindrance from a framed space to the concept of space, before returning to the space of a “painting in a painting,” undercut by the space of a surface without edges. Without a doubt, the movements here are those of dance: genesis, dilation, retraction, expansion, superimposition, but also evanescence, density, and trepidation... If I try to give a name to the space created by the manipulation of these notions or operations, I find no word in the dictionary. And therefore I can say: body, cosmos, theater, light, choreography... No doubt it’s a matter of all that but of more than that, mingling them all into strange scenes: duos, trios, sarabandes. Ultimately, amidst this paradoxical confusion of consciousness and chaos a single word always returns: the word

painting, to which I could more coolly add the word *composition*.

Once that’s been said, “we’re in the middle of things,” indeed we are, but only to start the path all over again, to know where this word leads us when it takes us to a substance and a spirit that are only alive to the extent that they escape. It’s a powerful drug, painting.

Looking at these canvases, I find myself before a history scene of this century’s art, in a strange war of genres that Zurstrassen varies far into the night where his world comes alive — a world whose only key is pure sensation, and the desire to let oneself be carried slowly along by shifting rhythms.

Gazing upon the painting of Yves Zurstrassen, I find myself thinking of a sentence by Gustave Flaubert: “A book, for me, is a special way of living. Apropos of a word or an idea, I do research, I lose myself in readings or endless reveries...” *

Let’s change the words: book and word become painting and form, and we are at the heart of Zurstrassen’s painting, of his very life, of his tightrope-walking construction.

* Quoted by Pierre-Marc Biais in “Flaubert, les secrets de *l’homme-plume*,” Hachette-Livre, 1995.