

The Cretian Dream of Painter Yves Zurstrassen

This essay pays homage to painting as a high art in its endeavour to define itself as a medium that creates meaningful images of man and the world.

Zurstrassen, who walks the boundary between the venerable cultures of French and Netherlandish painting, has occasioned this.

For that, I thank him.

Biblia pauperum

The church windows of the Middle Ages were a *biblia pauperum*; a bible for the poor who had not learned to read the written word. With illiteracy rates on the increase in the 21st century, there have never before been so many church windows and paupers' bibles – images of every size and material surrounding us day and night. They are simple, unequivocal, template clichés that are reproduced and distributed by the million in all formats and media. Alongside this ever growing multitude of short-lived images there is the constant presence of a small number of remarkable, elite and precious works of multivocal complexity: the paintings of the artists.

Their predecessors adorned the altars of churches and the throne rooms of palaces. Does the cultural aura of the painted image still prevail because it once occupied these places of spiritual and worldly power?

In the modern age, painters were pushed to the margins of established society, into zones of freedom or, in the

words of Robert Filliou, *républiques géniales*. They became outsiders, bohemians, *peintres maudits*. Their works were seen as revelations of all the little thorns in the side of civilisation's hard-won structures. So does this make them precious curiosities?

Forty years ago, artists themselves set about destroying the time-honoured discipline of painting. They slashed canvases, perforated them and burnt them, tore them from their frames, nailed them to the walls and draped them over old furniture. They replaced oils with acrylic paints and fats and transformed panel paintings into tabletops for satirical feasts: Julian Schnabel affixed plates to them, Diter Rot smeared them with cream cheese, Georg Herold with caviar, and the *petit maître liégeois* Jacques Lizène with his own excrement. The credibility of painting was in tatters. New Media entered the exhibition halls and museums.

Anyone taking up painting afresh in the wake of such a revolution can do so with a freedom that no artist before has enjoyed.

„*Anch io sono pittore*” – “I too am a painter”
 (Giorgio de Chirico)

The death of Picasso in 1973 was a public event that drew the eyes of the world to painting once again. An epochal exhibition in London in 1981 took the ambitious title *A New Spirit in Painting*. Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz and their followers, from Rudi Fuchs to Johannes Gachnang and Donald Kuspit, formulated a programme of painting with an unusually exalted tone: painting as celebration, painting as dithyramb. A new expressionistic pathos began to spread: Cucchi, Clemente, Chia and Paladino in Italy, Barceló in Spain, Garouste in France, Bervoets in Belgium. It was a Reconquista, in which the painted image regained its aura as something meaningful and precious.

It was in this creative climate that Yves Zurstrassen began to build his career as an artist. His was to be a career founded on the practice of a painterly ethic in which cynicism towards the medium, its materials and contents are quite inconceivable. His love of painting was to foster a depth of concentration that would preclude working in any other medium.

A lively optimist of sanguine disposition, Zurstrassen did not belong to the circle of brooding neo-expressionist pathos-seekers. He was influenced more by the French cultural tradition and the heritage of the *École de Paris*. This was a burden that would weigh heavily on him when the international art critics projected their reserva-

tions about the school of Paris onto his work. In the 1980s, he was particularly interested in the paintings of Pierre Soulages, but he was equally fascinated by the work of the COBRA group, Willem de Kooning and Asger Jorn, while, later on, at the beginning of the 1990s, it was the oeuvre of Gerhard Richter that posed the greatest challenge to him.

The studio

The ethos of the painter is clearly evident in the studio that this fifty-year-old artist has set up over the years. It is a perfect workshop, equipped with carefully selected instruments and materials, with rows of jars containing powdered Blockx and Schmincke pigments and make-up, various types and makes of linseed oil, drying agents and collections of painting tools. The large, whitewashed room is a former factory hall with extensive skylights and side windows, flooded with daylight. Here, his many finished canvases, large and small, are spread out over the all-round gallery level, the walls and huge easels. Just as Zurstrassen shuns acrylic paints and paint from the tube, so too does he prefer to work by natural north light and to follow the course of the day rather than using artificial lighting to turn night into day. The silken sheen that is the hallmark of his paintings only comes into its own properly in natural light.

In the summer months, he regularly works in Provence and Andalusia, setting up open air studios when the weather is fine.

Collage / décollage

At the sides of the room there are shallow boxes filled with white and coloured snippets of paper. The scissors used to cut them are not an unusual instrument in any artist's studio, for many painters create collages as preliminary studies for their paintings. What is unusual in this case is the fact that he keeps such a store of them. The shapes of the paper cuttings – squares, rectangles, circles – seem ordinary enough at first glance. Many are cut by hand, while others have been stamped out using a cutter. Still others are pieces of cut-up canvases that the artist has rejected. In some of the boxes are the sheets of paper from which the shapes have been cut out, leaving filigree patterns ready for further use. Zurstrassen trawls these treasure troves for the pieces he will need and integrates them into the layers of paint in the course of his composition, leaving them there or peeling them off again at the end of the painting process so that they leave a clearly outlined imprint in the body of the paint.

Cut-out shapes have sharp edges. They stand out against the brushwork of a thickly painted surface; all the more so when they are in contrasting colours, such as black on white: energy-laden signs easily discernible at a distance. But the hand that guides the scissors also tends to make angular movements, sharp angles and zigzags, creating the monsters and grotesques that are as much a part of his paintings as ornamental trefoil and petal forms. Scissors give Zurstrassen enormous scope to mix the kind of monsters that Asger Jorn so loved with the kind of ornamental forms we associate with Matisse. Not only the

scissors, but also the punched forms, lend themselves to “mannerist” experimentation: the painter can stretch them on the painting so that they appear to be suspended in a pale fluid.

Zurstrassen is not always content with the collage. Sometimes he presses a shape twice or three times onto the canvas, scumbling the colour field and lending it tonal depth while at the same time forming a fine cellular structure in the paint that stands out against the smooth sweep of a brushstroke like the feathers of a colibri against a banana leaf. It is only close up that the viewer becomes fully aware of the sensual alchemy, the coloratura and the musicality coursing through the large paintings.

« *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* » –
“A throw of the dice will never abolish chance”
(Stéphane Mallarmé)

Zurstrassen does not drop paper cut-outs onto a surface and leave them where they fall, like Jean (Hans) Arp. And yet he does seek to visualise the element of chance as an accomplice in the work, by improvising as well as combining.

This approach corresponds to the kind of aleatory practice that plays an important role in modern literature, music and art. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the primary medium for this in the visual arts has been collage in all its forms. In the work of Zurstrassen, we can observe from picture to picture how the artist has succumbed to emotionally inspired improvisation or has pursued a rational and cerebral combinatory approach. It

is not Arp and the surrealists to whom he looks, but to Matisse and the paper cut-outs of his 1940s Jazz series, which he intends to leave far behind him.

Pictures

My gaze sweeps across the landscape format painting (060613, 2006, 150 x 420 cm - page 22) like a reconnaissance aircraft surveying the earth from an altitude of 5000 m, zooming in and out to take in the shapes and forms that lie over the land or emerge tentatively from the undergrowth. The pale-primed canvas appears as a plane on which the black and grey forms stand out like oriental calligraphy on huge sheets of paper. But these are not lines of writing that might force the gaze to run vertically or horizontally. Nor do they jar like debris floating in space or the ocean. They are integrated into the picture plane and yet they move upon it. Perforated, filigree, graceful and amoebic, they seem to be anchored by nothing, and nothing seems to grant them a fixed place in the picture.

I see punched shapes opening in perfect spheres, their contours ornamentally following the circles, with hardly a straight edge in sight. But not all of them are mechanically punched. Some have been cut by hand – garlands, slicks akin to DNA chains – all of them subjected to traces of rapid movement, dry swathes of colour, galaxies of droplets and daubs of paint underpinning them, traversing them, superimposed on them. Many different speeds converge here on the canvas: *presto* – *andante* – *adagio*.

The predominant line of energy meandering across the picture starts at the upper left-hand edge and ends in two trails at the right. This is indeed a right-handed 'script': purposeful, hesitant, interrupted, blurring, forming knots and bends, gently probing an empty, vibrant space.

This linear energy occurs in many small 'studies'. In the square formats there are some individual, self-contained 'characters' that could be merged to form 'words' and 'texts' or even 'notations'. Zurstrassen practises emptiness and fullness: individual words hover and struggle to find a hold, while elsewhere myriad motifs jostle as loudly and brightly as any fairground crowd...

In one of the large square pictures (060710, 2006, 225 x 225 cm - page 23) the painter sets small open and closed circular forms and trefoils in shades of gold and silver directly onto the circling lines of movement like instructions for dance steps. Olivier Kaepelin wrote of these pictures in 2001 that "these are undoubtedly the movements of dance: beginning, dilation, retraction, expansion superposition, as well as evanescence, breadth, trepidation".

These 'open' pictures in which dance-like improvisation predominates are followed – as though by way of liberation and fresh start – by a series of 'closed' large black landscape formats on which filigree white cut-out forms are carefully distributed over the rectangular surfaces. It is fun to compare these to the stock of an ironmonger's shop (*quincaillerie*): irregularly shaped metal plates with holes drilled through them, ornamental keyhole fittings. Just like looking through a keyhole, these

pictures confound the eye: the white anonymous arabesques perforate the black surface and draw the gaze through the apertures into a black ground. And just as the alternating relationship between ground and plane balances out in the eye of the beholder, so too does the composition of 'floating' motifs on the picture plane gradually become tangible as the result of guided chance (*Formes sur fond noir n°4*, 2002, 150 x 420 cm - page 24).

Some of his pictures suggest a bird's eye view. They look like architecturally developed areas of the earth, redolent of archaeological aerial photographs. A large black square canvas is covered in pale grey rectangular areas that dovetail with one another, so that the ground plan looks like a densely built settlement. But there are white rectangles superimposed over the grey areas. Are these perhaps collaged sheets of paper with fine, dark lines on them? Surprisingly, these lines wander from sheet to sheet, building up an oscillating diagonal network that continues beyond the edges. How far does this network extend? The combinatory approach of the painter plumbs the depths of the picture while tracing its expanses (*120603*, 2003, 225 x 225 cm - page 25).

Other works in this predominantly black and white series of recent years force us to invert our bird's eye view. Instead, we look through the pictures into the darkness of the cosmos, where planets, comets, fixed stars, galaxies and stellar constellations are scattered, unexpectedly captivating the eye because the compositions appear to be concealed beneath some aleatory order. (*060704*, 2006, 200 x 200 cm - page 25). These are the works in which Zurstrassen most obviously breaks

out of the prison built by the rectangle of the easel painting. But he is too fond of playing with constraints to escape them entirely. And he was not content simply to include golden yellow and silvery grey hues in his black and white pictures. So Zurstrassen had to return to large, coloured canvases.

In recent months, he has been heaping bright and luminous hues onto his palette. In the blends and combinations he seeks, there is often a trace of the same anarchy that informs the paintings of his Belgian predecessor James Ensor: paint structured by a ragged brush, a scraper or palette knife, by monotypes or collaged reliefs, fiery contrasts of yellow, rust-red, and blue-green (*060707*, 2006, 225 x 225 cm - page 34). Zurstrassen, however, does not tend towards Ensor's sinister fantasies. His temperament is drawn more to the sumptuous tones of pale yellow, ochre and pink chords and to the gushing streams of paint found in the later work of de Kooning.

It was not easy for Zurstrassen to jettison the heavily freighted graphic vocabulary of his black and white pictures and inject a certain spirit and intellectuality into the feel-good factor of strong colour contrasts. He had to exercise strong self-discipline where the temptation of indulging in virtuosity is at its most irresistible. Seeing the pictures juxtaposed, viewers soon notice the stringent self-discipline he demands of himself: these are variations on a single compositional theme.

In the forefront of the bright, multicoloured background, the labyrinthine meander of that dark (usually brown) line of energy that defined one group of his black and white pictures reappears. It can push into the fore-

ground or become the carrier of the 'cut-out' colour fields that 'float' before it, overlapping, colliding, pushing one another, or breaking up like ice floes (060807, 2006, 250 x 330 cm - page 34). Elsewhere, red, yellow and pink dots are scattered like confetti over the punched forms that seem to be set in motion under the pressure as coloured volumes (060804, 2006, 190 x 400 cm - page 35). On a large, square canvas, Zurstrassen heightens the vibrant dynamics of these pictures to a highly complex play of colour that is almost like a collision between weather fronts in which the compressed energy of a 'cloud' filled with convulsive streams of colour and tiny cut-out elements drifts in diagonally from the left towards the clear sky of a brighter, more relaxed, expansive segment of blue, yellow and white. Close up, the many overlaps in this picture reveal a wealth of painterly details, a veritable *cornucopia* of sensuality, as though the painter were the very grandson of that old Flemish master Rubens himself.

It is difficult to write a text about this kind of painting without making such associations. All too often, cultural convention dictates how we perceive specific colours and shapes within the realities in which we live. These realities have expanded immeasurably since the twentieth century. Today, it is as easy for us to see stars, planets and galaxies in the paintings of Yves Zurstrassen as it is to see teeming archaea in micro-organisms, computer simulations of physical experiments, raging storms and and Giulio Romano's *Sala dei Giganti* in the *Palazzo del Te* in Mantua. At times we even suspect that the painter has deliberately shrouded his pictures of reality in abstraction

and that he is not drawing upon the world of images, but upon the very different world of sounds.

Visual music

"Perhaps Art is just taking out what you don't like and putting in what you do. There is no such thing as Abstraction. It is extraction, gravitation toward a certain direction. It is nearer to music, not the music of the ears, but the music of the eyes." (Arthur Dove, 1929)

The notion of the *violon d'Ingres* evokes the painter's love of music. But the notion of a synaesthetic perception of ear and eye, the portrayal of music in painting or the Pictures at an Exhibition in a musical composition is something that did not emerge until around 1900. Roger Fry, in 1912, was the first to coin the phrase 'visual music' to describe works which "give up all resemblance to natural form, and create a purely abstract language of form – a visual music." Since then, the titles of many paintings have been taken from music: *Fuga* (Kandinsky, 1914), *Oriental Symphony* (Marsden Hartley, 1912/13), *Jazz Paintings*, *Chinese Music*, *Primitive Music* (Arthur Dove, 1926/27, 1944), *Jazz-Hot No.1* (Kupka, 1935), while artists such as Mikalojus K. Ciurlionis, Paul Klee and Georgia O'Keeffe have spoken of their musical perception of painting – even if this is meant only metaphorically: "...chromatism in music and musicality of colours has validity only as metaphor." (Frantisek Kupka)

A sophisticated sound system and huge piles of CDs in Zurstrassen's studio set me thinking about visual

music. They were mainly jazz recordings – Barre Phillips, Charly Mingus, Charlie Haden, Marc Copland and Greg Osby, Miles Davis, Paul Bley, Furio di Castri and Tony Oxley, Archie Shepp, the Bill Evans Trio and many more besides. In a conversation with Claude Lorent in 1996 Zurstrassen remarked that, “I would happily compare my situation to that of a composer trying out various intruments and now daring to put them together and conduct his orchestra. The ensemble gels, the movements are played in turn, living their natural rhythm, and the colours are pure.”

Jazz, especially free jazz, is the musical form in which we can clearly discern what we would call the aleatory principle of ‘guided chance’ in this context. Zurstrassen listens to music while he is painting. He paints within a musical space. The music does not move his hands, but it does contribute to the way they move. The aleatory principle I already mentioned begins with the modulation of tones by the instruments. Consider, for instance, the long, drawn-out tone of a saxophone, petering out with the musician’s breath, in comparison to the sweeping movement of a brush steeped in paint, tracing an ever drier and more brittle line. I will not dwell on such comparisons here, since it is all too obvious that musical terms such as syncopation and phrasing lend themselves easily to descriptions of ‘abstract’ paintings. “In defining the aleatory game it does not matter whether the material consists of light waves or sound waves, of heavy layers of paint or finely drawn ink lines, of Latin or Chinese characters or any other elements of a combinatory system.” (Holger Schulze)

Serendipity

What, then, is the Cretian dream in the title of this essay? It is a dream of the labyrinth, of the red thread that Ariadne gave to Theseus so that he could find his way out again. Zurstrassen had his Cretian dream – as he puts it in a conversation with Claude Lorent in 1996 – in the 1970s on the island of Crete, and in his most recent paintings, that dream has been realised. It is a dream in which the painter leaves his technical mastery behind him by succeeding in “triggering a sort of production system of oneiric images”. He modestly uses an adjective that is freighted with the history of the interpretation of dreams and which is now used in all manner of trivial fantasy contexts, as we find if we put the word into a search engine like google. Yet the *système producteur* to be found in his pictures, and its evident intentionality, is not the kind of somnambulant *écriture automatique* pursued by the surrealists, but a finely balanced play between improvisation and combination, in which images are created that show the artist in constant interaction with chance.

Zurstrassen’s Crete is ‘Serendip’. Horace Walpole, who coined the word ‘serendipity’, says that he formed it upon the title of the Persian fairy-tale *The Three Princes of Serendip* (the ancient name for Sri Lanka), the heroes of which “were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of”. Ever since, serendipity has epitomised a form of seeking and exploring in which the end result bears little relation to the original purpose of the quest. Needless to say, this approach demands extreme openness, rapid reactions and the abil-

ity to draw intelligent conclusions. To combination and improvisation it adds a further element that can lead to astonishing changes of initial ideas, concepts and designs, bringing forth unexpected solutions. The painter surprises himself.

Weltbild

The *weltbild* that this artist formulates in his work is not the ordered projection of a construct, but the expression of a flowing energy, a stream in which the consciousness constantly seeks to retain and link fragments of perception and knowledge in varying constellations. The topicality of his work is evident in the fact that he achieves his highest levels of 'performance' where he succeeds in linking 'data sequences' previously thought to be independent of one another. Collage – décollage is his most important tool in this.

“On peut appeler imagination cette capacité d'articuler ensemble ce qui ne l'était pas. La vitesse réside dans ses propriétés.” (Lyotard) [*The capacity to articulate what used to be separate can be called imagination. Speed is one of its properties*]. I think that Zurstrassen, in his paintings, portrays nothing less than the individual open to the future, whose

individualistic consciousness combines new variations on the levels of existent and apparent reality, elastic changes of direction, oscillating time sequences (between deceleration and acceleration), notions of freedom and efficiency, of spirituality and sensuality, of ugliness and beauty.

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Translation: Ishbel Flett

On the subject of the aleatory, I referred with interest and gratitude to the following sources. On the aleatory, *Das aleatorische Spiel: Erkundung und Anwendung der nichtintentionalen Werkgenese im 20. Jahrhundert* by Holger Schulze, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 2000; on visual music, the exhibition catalogue *Visual Music. Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. – Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Thames & Hudson, 2005; references to the *weltbild* are based on Jean-Francois Lyotard, *La Condition post-moderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, 1979 – the quotation in English is from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition – a Report of Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis and Manchester, 1984, pp. 51-52).