



14.07.27 - PATTERN PAINTING, 2014  
Oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm

## Olivier Kaepelin

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## Space Hunter

YVES ZURSTRASSEN

About twenty years ago, Yves Zurstrassen allowed me a most unusual experience of painting: starting from an ancestral practice, I once again felt the impetus, the vivacity of its renewed heritage. After more than thirty thousand years, how strange to experience this oxymoron of newness in painting! Having come such a long way, transported by the flow, since Chauvet and Lascaux, the painter uses signs, white stones, cultures and creations that he unearths along his path. He puts them back together. He plays with them, to the extreme, until he forgets ancient games, to question the sudden newness of new assemblies, new rules, obtaining new forms that induce new relations amongst themselves.

Yves Zurstrassen plunged into that river, transforming it into a theatre, as his extraordinary studio shows. He never stood on the bank to watch painting as it passed by, drawing lessons and applications from it. No, he breathes it intensely, inside the movement that carries him. He acquired his essential knowledge of painting using the praxis born of the interior space in which it grows, suspicious of metalanguages.

Freedom is the very principle of Zurstrassen's work. It builds it, accompanying it every step of the way: freedom to engage wherever he likes, to step in the footsteps of Paul Klee, Henri Matisse or — even more still — abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Jean Degottex, or later in his oeuvre, Mondrian and Malevich, until he has lost the origins of his adventure, deliberately getting lost to better find his way. Through his jubilant and precise use of cutting, collage and *décollage*, he appropriates a new technique

and is bathed in the painting of today. Infused in this bath and inspired by this concept, his painting — that of his 20th-century studio — uses the economy of the fragment so prevalent in the twentieth century, before casting it aside and losing any sign of recognition through the action of *décollage*, which opens its arms to the pure paint on the canvas in a fresh concept. The material reality of the collage (torn, cut-out papers) withdraws to give place to the unique spaces sought by Yves Zurstrassen. This conceptual process allows him to recover the essence of painting. And, in this way, the sovereign painter appropriates whatever he wants. He mixes chosen elements until he constitutes, by shifting, by sampling, a language that does not owe anything to anyone.

It is a language that we must now discover and understand: the language of the work that we are left to interpret. Arriving at this moment filled with expression results from a 'methodical adventure' that is both mental and technical. Yves Zurstrassen thinks through using shapes. It is amazing to see how convincing and productive this theoretical/practical duo is in his work. Understanding



the very construction of one of his paintings and generative capacities means understanding its sense. In his work, there is never any application or illustration. He is truly essentially an abstract painter, and if he sometimes uses figurative elements in his work, we see that they are above all primarily abstract forms. The eye of Picasso and Paul Cézanne's *Vanitas* are all the more real because these abstractions are born of strategies of composition. This is probably why, when I ask him about his work, Yves Zurstrassen often evokes music. A passionate amateur of jazz and free jazz, he describes himself: 'I'm like a musician, I'm inside a movement, between the chorus, the solos and the improvisations. I don't think. I don't explain painting. I'm inside it and arrange it in a vibration that I try to provoke, to produce.'

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He confides that he never truly looks at a landscape and does not draw his inspiration from nature. Even more, the relations he enjoys with reality to construct his works do not fundamentally imply a relationship with a world exogenous to painting. In his work, everything comes from the 'place of painting', from its domain. It is here that he engages in dialogues with reality. 'I mainly live between the four walls of my studio. This is where I initiate and reinitiate my vision, my aesthetic project. I first have to engender a space, understand its breathing, find its pace.' Yves Zurstrassen's constant companions are the creations of other painters and of musicians. And if there is a 'reality', it is not

that of primary nature, but that of 'another nature', a second nature that is as animated as nature itself. This reality is art, more particularly abstract art, which enjoys every freedom and rids itself of every symbolism. Yves uses these freedoms to the point of destabilizing amateurs, experts and critics alike. They foil habits and patterns and even thwart the creator himself. Because the form is the essence, the 'absolute real', it distances the painter's oeuvre from all semblance of formalism.



Here, I think of an article on poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva. She writes, 'How could I, a poet, i.e., an essential being, be seduced by the form? If the essence seduces me, the form will come of its own accord. And it comes. And it will continue coming, I am sure. The form is commanded by a given essential and I pick it up by ear, syllable after syllable. Sculpting a form before filling it in! But come on, this is not a plaster mould. No, I am seduced by the essence, and then I incarnate it. This is what being a poet is. And I will incarnate it as essentially as possible (that is a problem of form). The essence is indeed the form — a child cannot be born as another.'<sup>1</sup>

I believe that Yves Zurstrassen's oeuvre, and the conception that is inherent to it, are close to Marina Tsvetaeva's approach. He feels and builds an essential relationship with the world, which he expresses in painting. And, as Marina Tsvetaeva says, 'If the essence seduces me, the form will come of its own accord. And it comes. And it will continue to come...' Yves Zurstrassen's investigations are founded on a similar experience. It is born from the painter himself, and its essential principle, as well as its development, are primarily

1. Marina Tsvetaeva, 'Le poète et la critique', in *Marina Tsvetaeva par Linda Lé*, Paris, Éd. Jean Michel Place, 2007, p. 99

within him. Here again I think — to better understand this self-generation — of Stéphane Mallarmé, who evoked the birth, not of a painting, but of a poem. In his 'Don du poème' (1865; 'The Poem's Gift'), creation emerges from the solitary 'work' of the writer, who spawns the fruit of his art, alone in his room at night.

I bring you the child of an Idumean night!  
Black, with pale naked bleeding wings, Light  
Through the glass, burnished with gold and spice,  
Through panes, still dismal, alas, and cold as ice,  
Hurling itself, daybreak, against the angelic lamp.  
Palm-leaves! And when it showed this relic, damp,  
To that father attempting an inimical smile,  
The solitude shuddered, azure, sterile.  
O lullaby, with your daughter, and the innocence  
Of your cold feet, greet a terrible new being:  
A voice where harpsichords and viols linger,  
Will you press that breast, with your withered finger,  
From which Woman flows in Sibylline whiteness to  
Those lips starved by the air's virgin blue? <sup>2</sup>

Although the style of the poem belongs to a form of Symbolism that is far removed from the 'modern' quality of Yves Zurstrassen's work, it expresses a notion of creation that enlightens the painter's position. The creator produces his creation alone. He gives it his days and nights, not in his studio, but in the chamber of the individual signature. It is here where the creator finds his substance: in the writing room. From this 'work', the poem is born, a 'voice' like that of music, which, through this image of self-engendering, will allow the writer's lips to touch those of his readers, who will utter and thereby understand the verses of the poem. In '*Pli selon pli. Portrait de Mallarmé*' (Fold by Fold: Portrait of Mallarmé) — a composition in which the abstractions of the poet, painter, and musician enter in resonance — Pierre Boulez uses this scene, this principle of creation stemming from the exercise of the thought of a single person.

This theatre or mental domain is not a figure of style. It bears the name of a living place, the incarnated location of its production: Atelier Yves Zurstrassen, avenue du Val Fleuri 19, 1180 Uccle, Belgium!

The theoretical position and practice of the painter are incarnated in this studio. We know of comparable places where architecture, light and atmosphere

emanate from the thought of the creator. The best known are probably the studios of Alberto Giacometti, Francis Bacon, or today, Damien Cabanes. These locations are like 'another body' of the painter, a place that wholly personifies them. Painters inhabit such spaces in the same way their work inhabits them. It is the projection of an attitude, a knowledge or a method. Speaking of their studio is speaking about themselves. It is like being in the very heart of a factory, a system, a cosmogony for their body, where their thought unfolds.

How could we fail to be impressed by the rigour of Yves Zurstrassen's organization? Each room seems to have its name and its function. In the basement: a stockroom, which is no dead letter. Through its manipulation, here, the past is alive. At every moment, we are invited to put it back under tension. Yesterday is not cast away for the beauty of today. Present life finds its support from a history, a continuity. Adjacent to this space, digital tools and software are

used to design structures, allowing Yves and his assistant to elaborate new paintings. Using this software, the painter reconnects with the physical gestures of the 1980s that have now become images and incorporates them into his recent drawings of grids and interlacing. Past and present walk hand in hand. Today, the painter uses fragments of old compositions and resuscitates them in new paintings.

On the ground floor, we discover distinct yet connected spaces. To the right, computers are at work on print-

ers and scale models, verifying hypotheses and rubbing shoulders with the virtual world, projecting new images. The main studio where large or small paintings are produced is to the left. This is where experiments take place, where the artist places his paintings upright against a wall or lying on the floor to look at them from the passageway upstairs. On the ground floor, we are at the heart of the reactor, in the beating pulse of the practice. This space for creation is also peopled with paintings that have been 'updated' by the artist, as he gives them a new shine. They come with a plethora of visual quotes (photos, postcards, posters) as musical quotations pour out of remarkable speakers that envelop and incorporate the visual works under construction. Jazz and



free jazz reign supreme. We hear works by the great masters and avant-garde experimenters ranging from Ornette Coleman to bassist and performer Joëlle Leandre, whose work often accompanies the painting. The musician will be present at BOZAR in 2019 and will play during the exhibition, thus allowing for a sort of transmutation of the studio's soul inside the museum galleries. This studio calls upon the senses of sight and sound and spaces the works. The eye and the body constantly move, constantly adjusting.

Increasingly empty rooms succeed one another before leading to large windows that confront the spaces to the nature of a garden. One such perfectly proportioned window allows taking the distance necessary for the various processes, the techniques and the craftsmanship demanded by the creation of the paintings. Then, the paintings take their place in an exhibition gallery. They walk on the stage of comparisons, dialogues, replies or effusions.



I am passionate about the proximity of this space to that of the crafting process. One interlaces with the other and gives life to the principle of the work in progress, the change, and the metamorphosis. The painting is there, it is 'still there' in its production process, but it already has its place in the more solemn status of a work of art on exhibition, set to encounter the other, in an intimate face-to-face. It looks at us as much as we look at it, in a place of occurrences and revelation.



The different stages of the journey could very well end here, but we are invited to experience two other instances of the painting's upstairs life. One of these takes us back to the laboratory of forms where, through an extraordinary archiving of small formats, the matrix of the paintings is reconsidered, before their birth, before their projection, before their first conceptual and mental effec-

tuation. This room is adjacent to a large library that allows a positioning and maturing of these forms. The other leads us through to a smaller exhibition gallery, a more familiar space where the painting is no longer in a museum setting or situation. Yves Zurstrassen has imagined another life for his paintings, as if it were important that the painting should be confronted with domestic places and everyday life. On this entire site, which is much more than a studio, the paintings all live their lives from the virtual dimension and the project, to and including the long and silent contemplation of the finished work. And we are here invited to experience all these lives.

True happiness lies in the fact that this journey, the plurality of these spaces, prevents the painting from becoming a static, easily-manipulated and consumable object. Quite to the contrary, we are invited to think of the work in its movement of creation, in its thought and in its incarnation through the design and organization of the studio. In this laboratory, we have the feeling of being at the very core of this displacement, in the regular beating that allows being with the art, unguided by past or present observations, additions, circulations of art objects.

For me, emotion runs high and is relentlessly renewed: it is constantly at the heart of this movement. The experience is intense, exceptional and rare for those who can appreciate it.

Without misleading idealization, I am convinced that this studio is the setting for the intelligence of Yves Zurstrassen's work. I have the strange sensation of being inside his skull — since the studio is his skull — where the many operations leading to the painting take place, living experiences of a thought through form and space. I can feel this as soon as I walk in, and every time I come back. If I might be so bold, I would say that in this extraordinary place, there is something of a Chapelle Ardente dedicated to creation and its joyous knowledge.

## Exhibition

Free

BOZAR  
Brussels

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Curator  
Olivier Kaepelin

