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Oil on canvas, 220 x 195 cm

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## The Painter's Studio

### The Game is the Rule

#### On the Road

Throughout his childhood and youth, Yves Zurstrassen experienced the many dreams and torments that animate us all and that would help shape — even build — his future. A good student, he was sometimes bored and discovered the joys of truancy. He drew, grew up, did not think about what was to come, had no time for that. He did not know what awaited him, but was impatient. At the age of 16, he ran away from home and delighted at his rediscovered freedom. When he returned, he declared that he did not want to study, but would become a painter instead. He studied graphic arts at Brussels' Centre des Arts Décoratifs (CAD), specializing in illustration.

He was still in a hurry, stopped his studies for good and left the family home. His life as a painter began at 18. He rented an attic where he painted while taking on small jobs. At the age of 23, in 1979, he hosted his first show in a friend's loft. It was a huge success: lots of visitors, with spectacular interventions by young dancers from the Béjart dance company. He then set off, went to live in Greece and Crete for a year.

Free as a bird, he absorbed a new era to the soundtracks of the changing times, *On the Road Again* and *Woodstock*, looking for the unknown. This is when what the artist calls his 'Cretan dream' took place: a dazzle, an excess that is not a tale, but the premonition of a passage, the end of an era, an embarkation. Like Plato's prisoner in the Allegory of the Cave, Yves Zurstrassen moved away from the shadows of years gone by, towards the light, towards knowledge,

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ideas and the wonders of the intelligible world. He no longer followed a path, but chose to create his own. He loved Mark Tobey (illumination, light, constellation, mental journey) and *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse, whose writing (extremely popular at the time; I was equally captivated) glorified the search for oneself, the paths of syncretism and initiatory eclosion. A remnant of mysticism and a fusional, pantheist relationship to nature still inhabited him. Sometimes, when he evoked the explosion of open-air painting moments in Spain or France, he was — as he says — in a trance-like state. 'I was a filter, traversed by the light and its variations.'

A change took place. His trajectory was marked with substantial encounters that transformed and revealed his true self, between hazard and necessity. Two 'shocks' — both at the Centre Pompidou — would also deeply move and bolster him: Pollock in 1982 and De Kooning in 1984. At the same time as he was capturing and provisioning for his painting, he became interested in repetitive music, notably that of Steve Reich. 'It was like sticks dancing in space. There again, I was a filter. I put myself in a state of mind to absorb it.' This acculturation sharpened his curiosity and fed his accomplishment.

Multiplying his encounters, he moved away from raging impulses and turned to the force of a work, creation at a human scale. His painting was ample, joyful, and it erupted in large loops of colour that all mix and penetrate one another. Sensuousness, fusion/effusion, Dionysian harmony, chorus. A stream flows; a landscape reveals itself. It moves. These canvases exult in a vein that Willem de Kooning would have recognized when he wrote, 'Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented.' From 1989 to 1993, Yves Zurstrassen's paintings sold very well.

At once both ogre and gourmet, Zurstrassen drew from within himself to learn from others, to enter into the painting and feel the essence of ancient works, as well as the contemporary. He argues that he is self-taught, but he knew about brotherhoods, their masters and their collaborations, from his own experience. Backed by their histories, he knew which obstacles and pitfalls to avoid: the need to please, to respond rather than to engage, and the absence of a founding gesture that tells a singularity.

Several years later, soon after the onset of the new century, he received the dangerous advice of dealers and collectors who were convinced that art must be pleasing, that the growth of an artist must be stopped so that he may forever be stuck reproducing the same works in a manner and format that prove popular at a specific moment in time. Such exhortations can asphyxiate talents and transform gold into lead. Zurstrassen sensed this threat and the danger of cheating himself if he were to stay still, betraying oneself by

imitation: becoming a copy of oneself. Others before him had successfully resisted. Robert Rauschenberg once said, 'I try not to get used to what I do.'

Yves Zurstrassen thus continued to explore, to doubt, and to move forward without responding to anyone's commands. Whatever the wielders of spectacle might think, he would always be on the side of the present, the gift. The perception of his work by others made no difference. It was his own, and would force him to forge his own identity, in a singular relationship to the world and to himself.

This interim charged and transcribed the burden of a life, the well-being of a person and a singular belonging to a history of art, to what the individual brings to the coming of a work and what the work will in turn change in the course of time. Zurstrassen understood the strength and complexity of the fundamental gesture, its sharpness and what it clears away for the temporal advance of a single act, off the beaten path, before being consumed, the overflow of a history. He never affirmed that such a thing would be his fate. No one can affirm this. But he knew that he must take this route: walk and emerge from the cavern. He believed in and sought this founding gesture that leaves a trace, perpetuating an identity. Baselitz, Ryman, Richter had shown the way. 'Do consider, Sir, that these are not things one can do while whistling,' as Nicolas Poussin said to King Louis XIII about his painting.

Returning to his homeland and his formative pathways, Yves Zurstrassen had to walk alone. 'How can one be free after 2000 years of painting?' he asked. By defining one's own rules. And by playing, experimenting, because the game is the rule and there is no freedom without boundaries, no trace or trail without deviation.

## The Empire of Signs

The context is fundamental, defines what we are: from somewhere and from a given time. Surround and around, object and subject, use and circumstance all shape the context of the painted work, yet differ depending on whether it is figurative or abstract. The former tends to represent and describe reality. It is a tale. The original abstraction in Yves Zurstrassen's work dismisses accepted reality in order to call upon a wider order, a *cosa mentale* that embraces the spirit — 'when we do not represent things, there is more place for the divine', reflected Mondrian — and for society as a whole. The real, which still exists, is absorbed by the visible, which plays its role like music and poetry.<sup>1</sup>

1. Apollinaire was amongst the first to feel this mutation: 'We are moving to an entirely new art form that will play the same role for painting as music plays for literature,' in *Les peintres cubistes*, 1913, Editions Hermann (1965), Paris

Yves Zurstrassen lives this inclusion of his work in a wider context in which he is a stakeholder, one that his painting must feel. To be a complete painter, it is not enough to pursue what has already been started and perhaps tends to take over, carried away by its own force, song or flight. One must still master this current in order to enrich oneself from it, to give time to passion, to patience perhaps. 'A painter must step away from his own painting if he is to broach it,' be oneself without ignoring the surroundings and affiliations.<sup>2</sup> Zurstrassen is aware of this and knows how, together with fellow artists Christopher Wool, Philip Taaffe, Jonathan Lasker and others, with them, he can shape a landscape that includes himself. But he will not find the community of a particular school or movement: these do not allure him. His painting will participate in a polymorphous identity involving a present time, perceived like an empire of signs.

When Fernand Léger drew the signs of his modernity from the spectacle of the city – everyday objects, the lights and calling of advertising, commerce and communication, etc., he initiated a rebirth of art, siezing the mundane, the conventions and techniques. Yves Zurstrassen is in turn fascinated by the multiplication of graphic signs stemming from ornaments, decorative arts, printing, economy, and today, from the digital revolution. An endless constellation of visual fragments accompanies each of our actions, spreads out like an infinitesimal pulverization and gives a saturated atmosphere to the air that is no longer that of Arletty in *Hôtel du Nord*, but of globalization, big data and a generalized graphic semiotic. He will never fail to retain and fully grasp these graphic presences gathered in books, or which mark the space of the city. He photographs them. It is indeed a siezing. Not a lifting of dust, but an iconic heritage, an active collection of codes and signals. To go further, one must 'find new grids', as Dubuffet once said. The entry into painting of a silent populace of vehicular, useful or gratuitous shapes leads to multiple evolutions that must first be identified and transformed into a visual resource.

A huge roll of thin paper fixed in a printing press provides the necessary fabric to cut up the icons. Then, using software, the white paper is transformed into a stencil-lace that responds to Zurstrassen's needs and purposes. Concurrently memory and project, the sheets have accumulated over the years and the works of art linger like so many matrix documents stored in large boxes. Several thousands await new uses and new recruits.

Beginning around 2005, the presence of these sheets became a full part of the plastic creation and a veritable graphic invention, unrelated to any history of collage or stencil. These arrows, these geometric or floral shapes, these

2. All unidentified quotes are by Yves Zurstrassen, excerpted from conversations or a text I wrote in 2009: 'In a Silent Way', for *Yves Zurstrassen: In a Silent Way: 2001-2009*, published in 2010, Éditions du Regard, Paris.

stars, these spirals, these weavings, these toothed wheels, these gables, these springs, these swirls..., patterns, wefts and motifs will live and vibrate inside the canvases, arming them, structuring them, hiding or revealing, playing a role of background or surface, upside down, as backdrop or frontispiece, evidence or distraction, trapped time (when the last that emerged is not the last to be painted), yin and yang, explosion or echo. Their apparition seals a new identity, this essential founding gesture that implies a singularity, a signature, a change in status or scale (like a fictitious character), and of the material significance of the sign, which has become figure and object: it is the very activity of the canvas. Veritable basin of memories, these icons and grids with infinite affluences release a depth of focus that takes us from one palimpsest to another in the very verticality of the unveiling and coverings. Having appeared on a canvas, then becoming different on another, they institute strange consanguinities.

### The Trace and the Gap

Yves Zurstrassen's work produces a memory at the same time as it projects itself into a new oeuvre, which feeds from its predecessors and then becomes concealment and resource. Volatile and forgetful, if it is to make a trace, the memory must be organized and mobilizable at any moment. The big data of icons that are assembled and used become created and reusable forms, a first and partial appearance of his 'reserves', his pockets of memory. Next comes a census of the finished and photographed ensemble of works, with their descriptions. Collected in albums designed by Yves Zurstrassen in 2000 and organized chronologically, they fall within the scope of the progressive realisation of a catalogue raisonné.

In the spring of 2019, the A4 albums have already itemized 2124 pieces. For Yves Zurstrassen, these collections are not only documents destined for ulterior studies and future readers, but represent reconnaissance and deepening tools for an everyday usage. No one knows the destination if he knows not the origin. Every creation is a transformation that bears a trace of a before. Nonetheless, Heraclitus' river, in which no one can bathe twice in the same water, remains the same river. We are similar and multiple, since we have only achieved a part of our potential. This is true for Zurstrassen as well, but he will have given himself the means of a cartography of the figures born from his work and which contain the infinite combination of his inventions.<sup>3</sup>

3. According to the 'ergodic' concept (which allows extrapolating the totality of a random process from a unique realisation), Raymond Queneau, in *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Gallimard 1961), offered the reader-manipulator an animated book-object that looked like an almost infinite space of vision and sense. The work of the painter — but it is he who chooses to assemble such or such excerpt and not a crowd of anonymous readers — possesses the same endless potential that is the conservatory of a life. Thus retained, it will forever exceed the energy of the creator.

We can then reunite, measure the scale of a remnant and the permanence of our incompleteness.

Such knowledge of paths crossed, made possible by the availability of these 'pockets of memory', reveals a great amplitude of journeys/projects in becoming, so that it clears the horizon rather than blurring it. It is the great escape, the rule that frees and amplifies. 'The right moment is situated where you escape the rules. Every time you start working on a painting, you don't know where you're going. You're discovering a new country. Freedom demands that you should go further.' As this marathon runner notes: 'Memory because I doubt. (...) To stay as close as possible to myself. (...) Often I revisit the viruses I did not develop.' This principle of contagion gives virality a festive air, as well as one of long patience.

Zurstrassen's painting, filled with a blend of lyrical and semiotic musings, finds its dimension in large formats. But the small-format works hold a particular place, somewhere between sketches and studies. The term can remain open and incompleteness promising. In the artist's studio, there is a space where he keeps his paintings, sketches and studies. They are stored tightly, one against the other, arranged by date and surmounted with (small) photographs that play the role of signs for the prospector examining his land. We are on the mezzanine where the completed paintings are kept. In the back, there is a sort of corridor that can escape visitors' glances and where two people could not walk side by side and upright. Mystery hovers over this space, a specific component that evokes a secret cabinet, an arms rack or stock of seeds for next season's gardening. Yves Zurstrassen enjoys walking here, sometimes after unearthing an old painting in an album. The flourishing of these small formats sometimes precedes the creation of a new large painting. 'Each painting is prepared. I place the small-format works on the floor, invert them, interleave them, superimpose them.'

Through this return to the sources, a work is not just born when it is painted, but progresses in the course of a long journey. The constantly moving painter only measures his gait through the length of a journey. The pressure of the moment is engraved in time, doubt and research, at the end of the (unattainable) journey, in a crucial slowness. To overlook his own painting, Yves Zurstrassen will have to cross it and, 'To tame it, you need a lot of time, as you would with a person. Today's systems go against that.'

This active slowness allows the anchoring of a diversity of expressions in a filiation and a consistency. It is perilous — and the business of historians — to punctuate a life's work by distinguishing series, leaps or the permanence of an eternal comeback. With Yves Zurstrassen, the cross-breeding of grids and

windows, edges and overhangs could give needy watchers the sentiment of discovering a suite of fleeting paintings without link or common measurement. But the opposite is true. The links span across time and have provided the form — even going back twenty years — with the vivaciousness of a repartee in a conversation of today. 'In my studio, in front of the support, when I remove the forms cut out using a digital cutter, I play with the surprise of the opening.' When the game goes beyond the rules, the painter exults and knows pleasure that is greater than reason.

## Manufacture of the Sensible

The painter's activity is twofold. Artist and artisan, he conceives and then he makes. He needs a studio to work in and enjoy a space in line with his creation, to find his 'corner of the world'.<sup>4</sup> Location and the link between the artist and his time in the studio, open or hidden, factory, palace, attic, cave or belvedere: it is a self-portrait. Some working spaces, such as Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre* or Rodin's studios, are used concurrently for work and entertaining. Other studios, such as Francis Bacon's or Eugène Leroy's, appear reclusive and secretive. Yves Zurstrassen matured with his studio as others might with their clothes: with the passing of time. The dream of a studio in the air will soon materialise. It demands pain, money, reason and pleasure. I know studios that are bigger than the artists who work there and others that too small for their appetites.

Yves Zurstrassen's studio is the right size: immense. A stakeholder in his project, it is a space for living and working where one can breathe in the same air that one breathes out. Text and context. It is an ideal palace, a realm for water lilies, a manufacture of the sensible 'to think one's own thoughts'.<sup>5</sup> Starting with an initial small industrial building in the municipality of Uccle, which would soon be extended and multiplied, the gestures enjoyed its extent, the canvases its format, the memory of its hideouts.

Every morning, the worker leaves his home at seven o'clock and crosses Brussels. When he reaches the Val Fleuri at the other side of the city, he is at home once again. All the spaces and instruments are here: for painting. The original building has become the antechamber of manufacture and is a reconstitution of a domestic setting. It opens onto the large working space surrounded by mezzanines and bathed in zenithal light from above. Sloping ground allowed the creation of another floor at garden level. It boasts two large rooms, the latter of which has become — according to Zurstrassen's organized

4. Gaston Bachelard, 'La maison est notre coin du monde', in *La poétique de l'espace*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1961

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (*Architecture for Thinkers*), 1974, Random House

presentations — a place for confronting and linking the artist's most recent creations or for paintings destined to be shown in an exhibition. The basement, which once housed a digital studio, has become a storage space for completed paintings. This description, this organization could not give back this space its true nature of previously-evoked 'corner of the world'.

The size, the silence, the disordered and clever intermingling of what is already present and what is pending give the visitor the sensation of passing through a suspended moment in time, a prologue to an execution to which he will not be invited. It is already, or will be, accomplished in silence and only in the presence of the body of the painter. The technique is defined, the memory and the trace have, or will be, inventoried. All the tools — 'I have always loved tools' — are in place. The machines at work here are at the peak of their performance.<sup>6</sup> The blank canvases, tightly stretched on frames in accordance with the preference of the artist, always have the same slightly grainy texture. Colours are made up, experimented with and held in hundreds of labelled flasks. The backdrops — which have become major in the most recent works — are tried out on large panels spread out in the studio. The iconic lace tablecloths await, before making their entrance. The old patterns that we recognize from completed or ongoing works that have been preserved after being appropriated will serve future works of art.

Recently, starting from this retained stock of formal witnesses, Zurstrassen enlarged them by cutting brightly coloured papers, placed horizontally before being assembled in accordance with new acquaintances. He then photographed them and attached them onto a large panel, a sort of journal of an anterior future, situated at the exact spot where he paints.

Not far from here, at the entrance of the studio, there is a wall of sound, made up of a multitude of CD-sized drawers that hold the recordings of beloved musicians. Although music withdraws when Zurstrassen paints 'in a silent way', this accomplishment could not take place without a preliminary long trajectory. Music is never an accompaniment, but a nourishment. The sound is reproduced — it goes without saying — through speakers with unparalleled acoustical qualities. Yves Zurstrassen says that this is 'music for painting', intermingling jazz and contemporary music, rather free and violent. Let us mention but a few. Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, Evan Parker, and above all and foremost, she whose resounding and inventive proximity he feels more than any other: cellist and vocalist Joëlle Léandre, another artist who understands the price of silence.

This large studio, halfway between factory and bridge crane, cloister with its silence, cannot be left without perceiving that a secret has been

whispered, incorporating the painter and his oeuvre without needing to pass through words: that a knowledge of oneself and the present time, the history of an art and a man, have given us a sign and will leave a true trace. The generous creator who claims to mistrust 'states of lyricism', but who 'lives every ecstasy' in his studio, continues to progress 'as far away from niceties and demands as possible', along the road to freedom.

## The Fire Smoulders

It has been twenty years since this restitution by signs began, born of a combat between impulse and reason, a history of two lives residing in one, marrying, rejecting and magnetizing. One invokes the mountain on which to lose oneself, the other the force of the models and their articulation. Both overlap one another. These two worlds with distant inclinations can be read in each painting, in an encounter that blends them in apportionments and lyrical community.

On the strength of this experience, in the early 2010s, Yves Zurstrassen embarked on an analysis of each component of his paintings. In 2011, at the Fundacion Antonio Perez in Cuenca, Spain, he commented, 'The very rich experience of black and white revealed my identity,' when he showed paintings that played with this duotone. In 2013, he inverted the play of collages and peelings: 'The cut-out patterns, placed on the surface of the composition, change place to cover the background.'<sup>7</sup> This permutation profoundly inflected the structure of the works and introduced more geometric compositions into the division of the space of the canvas and the repartition of the colours. Although the lyrical power can still erupt, significant work on the method had been achieved. In an analogy with a layout, it could be called a 'lay-canvas'.

An architectural order emerges, different to that of the landscape, by giving the background a strength of base of colour and by dividing the canvas in distinct portions separated by fault lines. Colour still circulates above. Below, the icons are still here, but they take part in an armature rather than an effusion. Families and series take shape, like so many experimentations conducted to the end of intensity, in the clever order of variations. Such highly advanced, radical progress comes from far away, from accumulated stockpiles, from treasured uncertainties and risks taken, from joyful knowing and a majesty that is long established but never invoked.

All awaiting days anew.

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