



09.02.18, 2009
Oil on canvas, 250 x 250 cm

YVES ZURSTRASSEN

II

A Theatre of Reinvention

I mentioned the essential presence of music in this studio. It accompanies and stimulates the inner movement of the painter as he seeks and composes his space. This movement is more essential than the elements it conveys. Its position is comparable to that of a writer. What is important is not such or such word characterized by one sense or another, nor the accumulation of lines, but, most of all, the order of the words and the type of phrase they compose. The painter does not think in phrases, but in forms. For him, it is not the declarative or the rhetorical, but the 'performative' that counts. For him, 'attitudes become forms', and it is this that he constructs with history or the novelty of his forms — a novelty born of the exercise, the repetition and the knowledge.

For Yves Zurstrassen, we mentioned Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis, but let us not forget Shirley Jaffe or Robert Rauschenberg. In knowing them, the artist does not make use of quotations, but chooses to delve to the heart of their work. He uses them, employing *détournement*, deconstructing before reinvesting them to achieve an intoxicating generation of new forms. They are the cells of a body of painting that become those of his own body. Such manipulation, such transformation and engendering of forms can, for me, be clarified by an answer given to Italo Svevo by James Joyce, one morning in Trieste. When Svevo sees a pale and exhausted Joyce come in for his first coffee of the day, he says:

You look tired. What have you been doing?
— I have not stopped writing, replies James Joyce.

— My God! You must have written many pages.
 — No, only two or three, replies Joyce.
 — Ah! murmurs Svevo, taken aback. You must have unearthed extraordinary words or invented incredible new words.
 — No, says Joyce, just ordinary words of everyday language.
 — So why all this work and time? exclaims Svevo. What did you do with these words?
 — Mostly I tried to place them in the right order, replies Joyce. Everything is there, in the order that conveys the pace, that creates the spirit of the material, of the language. It punctuates, distributes blanks, assonances, rhymes...¹

Painting, sculpture of words? James Joyce speaks of breathing, of this investigation by way of the phrase, the air, the sigh, of a wonderful material that is never static and is created by breathing. This quest is a presence in the work of Yves Zurstrassen. When I question him on this subject, in his studio, he does not speak of literature, but once again evokes jazz, a medium that corresponds with his art. He speaks of a shared desire to find the right structures and forms through composition and interpretation. He confides:

I am like a musician. Sometimes I play on my own, sometimes with other painters around me. In my memory, in my hands, I sometimes play in a quartet, or with more: in an orchestra. The entire composition is transformed. Like musicians, I follow the notes and sometimes I choose to push one as far as I can. Sometimes I imagine chords and choirs. When I discover a figure, a gesture or the appropriate reuse of a figure, I grasp and develop these little 'discoveries'. They can take me to one painting or to a series of small works, like the yellow and black pieces that I am currently developing. Sometimes I get the feeling of finding a precise tool through the colour, paper, paint, collage and *décollage*, digital drawing.... So I grab it and use it to the ultimate, in all sorts of experimentations and tests, until I get the feeling that I have gone as far as I can. I then archive it, to perhaps use later. I do not abandon it, but prefer to craft a new tool, both theoretical and technical. This too I will use to the very end. After using a tool, I combine it with others so they can help me create new paintings with new harmonies.

I have formal passions, then relinquishments. But the devices and instruments that made these passions possible remain in my studio.



They are in reserve, in my archives and in my photographs, and I can use them again when I want. I have no taste for the *tabula rasa*. In the works I have completed these past few years, the background of my canvases is sometimes made up of old fragments that I use again, crop, reinterpret and reuse in the current piece. Using this process, I

have a sense of maintaining a consistency, a continuity from one period to another. Painting is not made of arbitrary negations and ephemeral coups: it is a subtle and complex current. Fleeing forms emerge from that stream, from that space escaping from all sides, as evoked by Ted Hughes.

Paradoxically, the experience of surprise, which is an essential element for art and for our cerebral activity, is born from repetition. But for this, the presence of the past is necessary. A form that is too perfect is one that I will stop, knowing that what follows will be deadly. As I change, I regenerate, reviving my hand and my thought.

In Toledo, I presented a series of very graphic black-and-white paintings. For a while, I plunged into this black-and-white. I invested myself in this dualism that I materialized in very affirmed

and diversified structures. I like radicalism and rigour, but I also know that at one point, I will break the system that I have built. I need this rhythm: affirmation, repetition, rupture. Unravelling the systems that I develop enriches me, revitalizes me and allows me to go on.

Yves Zurstrassen celebrates this mental attitude, this need to prepare the irruption of surprise. This economy is essential to him. He recognizes a vitalist principle akin to neurobiology and neuro-genetics that makes the experience of surprise one of the essential processes of our neural activity, escaping ageing and cerebral anaemia. I sense the source of this joy, this serenity that oozes from his work, and which stop him from being a copyist of himself.

This jubilation and energy are the fruits of his poetic and ethical stance. It transforms the man, the painter, into a being who finds his sense in the creative



process, in the works and the days of this creation. All the movement of reality resides in this act of creation, not in the completed creation. Yves Zurstrassen inhabits the rhythm of the world and awaits the emergence of reality. Each day, he has a rendezvous with the hour of birth, the time of growth, with its imaginary knowledge and figures, with the art and the artists that are within him. They have carried him to the baptismal font and, as he explains, they are part of the time of the body of painting that is his today. Throughout his life as a creator, he has been dealing with time, beneath and beyond the duration of his life.

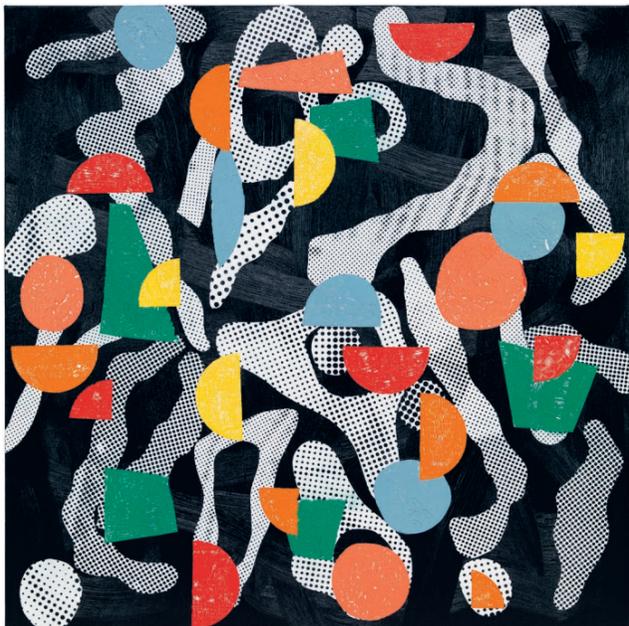
Nearly twenty years ago, I was in Paris with Yves Zurstrassen and read to him a sentence by Georges Perros, which I had selected for him. I felt that it clarified the core of his work and that it embodied the crucial question that greeted him every morning when he arrived in his studio after crossing the city. In 2019, painting awaits Zurstrassen the way writing waited for Georges Perros. George Perros wrote, 'The poet only has time for and with himself.'

I was thinking of the painter when I read to him this sentence referring to time, which had to be trusted like a benevolent companion.

In the course of the years, this trust has allowed him the free and sovereign use of history and its codes, which have become his own. I wrote about his painting: for certain painters, painting is at once both the learning of strict rules of composition and style, and paradoxically, the affirmation of the greatest of freedoms. This freedom is not a petition of principle, but a precisely constructed space. It is through knowing the history of art, the engagement within the cre-

ation of the century, the mastery of the gestures, the play of forms and their applications, that the space itself, without discourse, makes me feel this freedom in action.

Yves Zurstrassen is the painter of this emancipation. The challenge is in the fact that the deepest knowledge of the great works of art of the time – Tobey,



De Kooning, Pollock, Polke, for example – is a guarantee for getting rid of a reductive ego. Thanks to the scouring, the traversing of this visual flux, he reaches his own painting and clearly becomes its subject, wholly. In fact, Yves Zurstrassen no longer wants to allow himself to be distracted by himself, by the events of his life and his biography, so that he can attain a deeper life, the life of creation.

In the manner of the Italians, he practices *rifare*, just as the Baroque, Mannerist or Renaissance artists 'redid' the works of the masters they selected, in order

to shed any complacency. Amidst this *rifare*, to get rid of the conventional knowledge that carried them, albeit by constraining them to generate their own style, Yves Zurstrassen withdraws, in full knowledge of the history that has shaped him. His oeuvre encompasses a territory to trigger the step beyond that, robbing him of this consciousness, allowing this experience against all extensive and reducing grammar.

Thanks to this complex, methodical, adventurous investigation, the forms authorize this exercise of freedom. In effect, what do we perceive of the structures and mechanisms that he puts in place? Firstly, an extreme independence of figures from the surfaces, a paradoxical addition of dissimilar or oppos-

ing characteristics that define constructed and composed areas of varying formats, blending appropriations from the past (styles, images, poetic) and original visual strategies. Each painting is made of fragments, not to remain in a state of fragmentation, but – to the contrary – to create the feeling of wholeness through the expansions, the 'simmerings' of the various surfaces of the canvas. The painting results from an aesthetic of collage that initially produces a sensation of covering and opacity, before the opposite happens through the technique of *décollage*, and before we sense the fragility of an infra-thin surface that generates an airy, mobile and transparent visual nature.

Yves Zurstrassen toys with these paradoxical elements with the greatest independence and pleasure. The pleasure consists in going sufficiently far in the



game to lose track of its rules. This poetic gesture consists of calling everything unto itself, as many contemporary poets and musician do, to animate the space with all conceivable visual incarnations and the many virtualities that they suppose. Looking at a painting by Yves Zurstrassen means becoming the actor of a poetry in which we shift, unhindered, from the framed space to the concept of edgeless space, before returning to the space of the 'painting within the painting', as we find in *13.03.12* (2013), *12.10.04 – Free Jazz* (2012), *14.05.24 – Pattern Painting* (2014), *15.02.25 – Opening* (2015, and to once again leave that space for off-stage surfaces. There is no doubt that these to-and-fros and movements are comparable to dancing: with genesis, dilatation, withdrawal, expansion, superimposition, as well as subtraction, removal, evanescence, illusion, modesty...

If I try to find a name for the space created by these rudiments or operations, I can find no word in the lexicon. I shall therefore hazard these: body, cosmos, theatre, light, architecture, drawing, choreography... Possibly all these words, but more particularly those that can be bound in strange scenes: carnivals and sarabande. Behind these superimpositions, combinations, or shifts made of chaos and order, one word obstinately rears its head: painting, which I can more 'coolly' associate with composition.

Realising that 'we truly are in the place of painting' only serves to revive — once again — its displacement on the map to find out where this word takes us, offering us to a substance and spirit that are only alive because they escape us. Stupefying mighty power of painting, stupefying desirous machine... When I stand before Yves Zurstrassen's canvasses, I find myself in front of strange battles of genre. The painter lets them shrink to an appeased tonality, looking for a constant spending of energy to attain a general vibration that will animate his universe. The only 'entrance key' is the pure sensation and desire of being taken away in a slow displacement of rhythms.

When I look at Yves Zurstrassen's painting, I remember this phrase by Gustave Flaubert: 'For me, a book is a special way of life. I research a word or an idea, I get lost in endless readings or reveries...' ² Let us change the words book and word into painting, space and form: we are at the heart of his painting, of his own life, his construction, this 'methodical adventure' evoked by Braque and Reverdy. Yves Zurstrassen does not reject this term, but specifies that, for him, a method is only worth something if it involves thinking of its opposite, if it contradicts it, or if he can develop it to a faraway point that forces its questioning or abandonment.

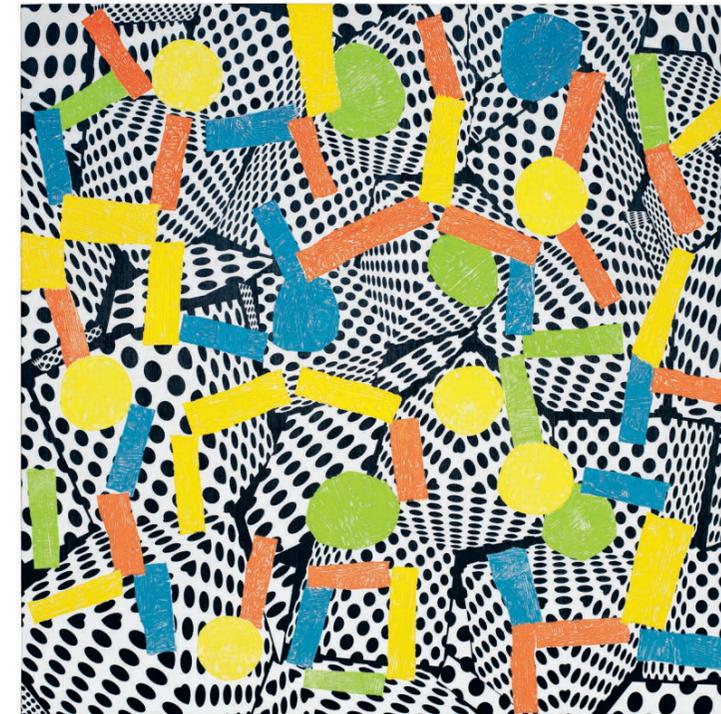
2. Gustave Flaubert, letter to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie (1859), quoted in *Correspondance*, Éd. Louis Conard, Paris, 1927, p. 357

The essence lies in the balance between rule and risk. As did mathematician René Thom, Yves Zurstrassen reminds us that any order, any system, presupposes thinking within itself its opposite, catastrophe or chaos. The rigour of the lines presupposes the trembling and breaking of the tracing. For example, geometry and its development led the painter to make use of digital design, but this digital design would in turn be manipulated by the painter's hands, which

subject it to the randomness of the ripping or the mixture of the visual materials. The undulation of flat planes revive the dialogue and contradictions between intuition and plan. Yves Zurstrassen knows this type of rhythm and beat very well, thanks to jazz and its capacity to use improvisation to extract itself from these melodic lines. His love for John Coltrane or Albert Ayler is not unrelated to his visual work. His compositional structures show harmonies with the jazz of these two great interpreters, as well as with the science of Edward Lorenz, Ilya Prigogine or Isabelle Stengers.

On this subject, we should also note that at certain times in Yves Zurstrassen's artistic career, the gestural lyricism of his painting, a form of creative chaos, had grown

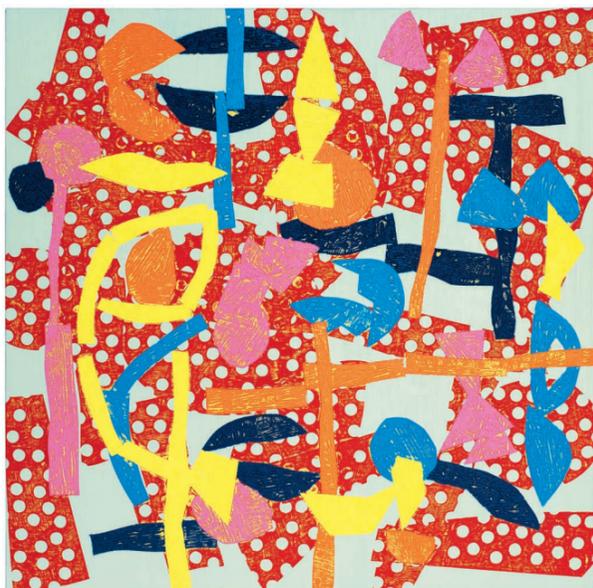
unbearable. In the same way that it affected Archie Shepp or Ornette Coleman, it opposed them all, in a natural motion, a concrete and constructive force of will. Zurstrassen's conception of the world consequently opens its arms to this game of constraints and paradoxes, which he expresses through various modulations, through the sinuousness of the paintbrush and straight design, the wavelength and the particle, the meander and the right angle. He builds this world through this balance. He seeks a fragile equilibrium of energies. 'I would go mad if I belonged to one sole order', he says. 'For me, that is intolerable. I don't believe in totalizing concepts, in monolithic practices. I think this explains Jackson Pollock's last period with *Deep*, where he looks for a form of peace.' The same applies — despite all we know about the edicts of socialist-realist ideology — to Malevich, who decided not to remain silent, but to abandon the territory where his experiences had led him in order to use it for other purposes: a singular transfiguration of a sensitive heritage.



16.10.30 – THE BEGINNING, 2016
Oil on canvas, 170 x 170 cm



In any event, through these various eras and periods, the visual practice holds the key. In this sense, as Xavier Douroux envisaged it, Yves Zurstrassen is lyrical: the beauty of his work stems from this rejection of dogma, which enriches



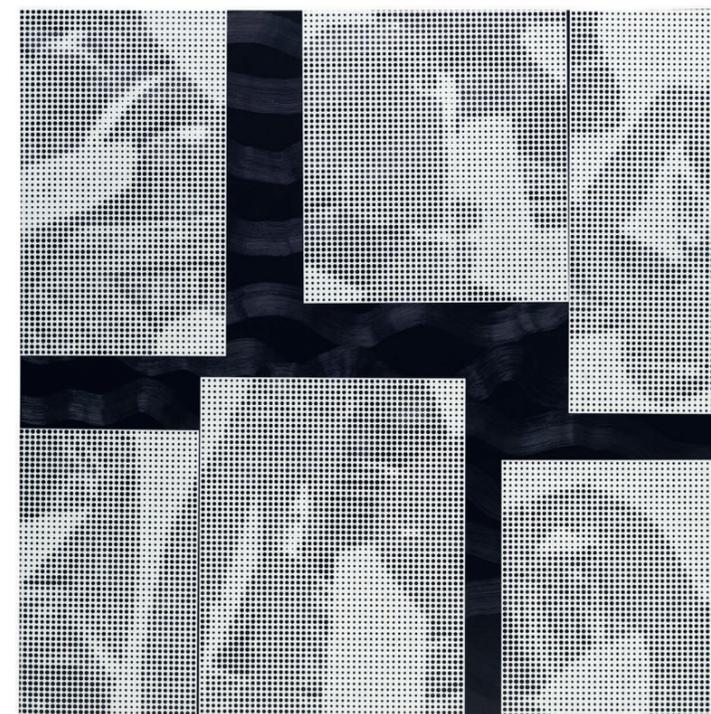
his work. The risk and the opposing views deceive methods and rules. It is telling that Yves Zurstrassen wanted Joëlle Léandre, this explorer, to be at the heart of his exhibition at BOZAR. It is a question of inventing, not inviting repetition of the uniform. More than anything else, the artist fears a state in which he might forget his true treasure: his ability to interpret.

Yves Zurstrassen's oeuvre cannot be summarized in the expression of impulses and propulsions. It is not quotational or post-modern. These processes are only changing and temporary borrowings offered to the manifestation of his freedom. As far as

he is concerned, the highest level of emotion is at the end of the journey, when we no longer recognise ourselves, when we can no longer define and when our being is only present for the sole 'being' of the presence of the painting. Past and future dissolve and the painting becomes an intense and subtle manifestation of the present, there, before us.

Today, I look for this subtlety. I am no longer in an era where everything had to be effusion. I try to regain the same intensity by alternating between analyses and impulses, the controlled use of values and random projections. Today, I'm very interested by the attitude of someone like Charlie Haeden in the world of jazz, or Albert Oehlen in painting. Every day, making a painting becomes more complex, more difficult. I try to make pieces that you can confront and use to confront the world. I try to understand what lies beneath the crafting of a painting and am conscious of the geologies it requires. You need a whole life to make a good painting. I know that you need to have an inner sensitivity and a culture shaped by the history of one's art, and by history itself, by an understanding of your peers and former creators, but I also know that you must get rid of dictionaries to take a hold of time, of the long time, of the well of time: the studio.

'Making a painting that is capable of confronting itself', to use Yves Zurstrassen's words, is the very problem of the painter. Indeed, painting has a very long history paced by heroic periods, such as 20th century abstraction. Painting in the 1980s meant taking responsibility for this past and the dialogues it inspired. This is what the American and European painters of the era did, as shown by American writer and critic Rafaël Rubinstein in his works on Shirley Jaffe, then on Noël Dolla, Bernard Piffaretti, Bernard Frize, to whom I could add Christian Bonnefoi, Dominique Gauthier, without forgetting Raoul de Keyser, Claude Viallat, Louis Cane, Daniel Dezeuze and the Support/Surface group or, for the youngest, Didier Mencoboni, Dominique Figarella, Pascal Pinaud, Bruno Rousselot, Damien Cabanes, to name but a few.



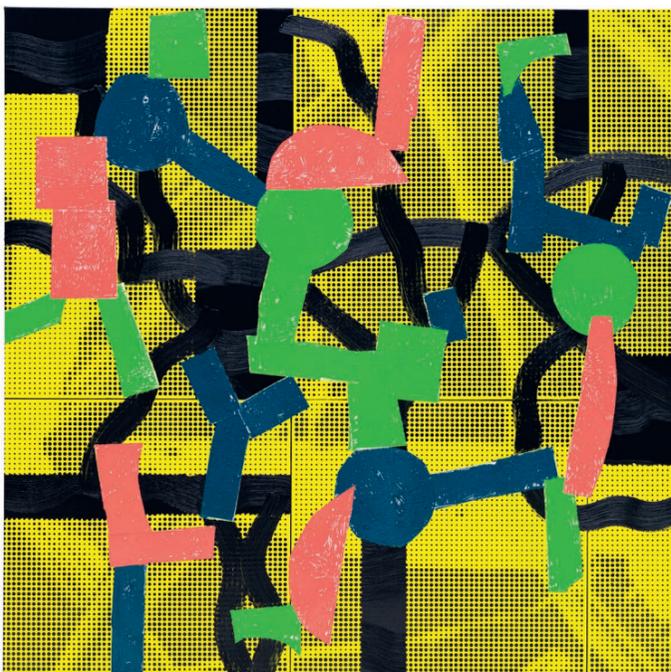
In Europe, this affirmation of abstract painting also flourished in Belgium, Spain, Germany, Switzerland and Italy, in sometimes hostile atmospheres that fortified these works despite their isolation. Regardless of the vivacity of these creations or the interests or discourses of the day, the prevailing criticism focused on other objects and artistic productions. Painting was often considered an archaeological practice. Yves Zurstrassen recalls that in those days, being a painter demanded a well-anchored conviction and the awareness of the true value of this means of expression.

On this subject, he evokes his friendship with painter Jean-Paul Huftier, represented by the Stadler Gallery, which organized one of its landmark exhibitions on the conception and creation of the visual abstraction of the day at the André Malraux Museum in Le Havre. He recalls a trip to New York to follow up on meetings he had had in France with Norman Bluhm, who, along with Shirley Jaffe, were the pioneers, the intellectual references for these young painters. In both the United States and Europe, an attentive welcome was reserved for this generation of American abstract painters (Philip Taaffe, Christopher Wool, Peter Halley, Jonathan Lasker, David Reed, Tom Noskowski, Joseph Marioni, etc.). But this was not necessarily the case for young European painters, including Yves Zurstrassen, who amuses

himself by quoting a note in the guest book at a Joan Miro exhibition by a furious visitor who proclaimed: 'Painters! We should cut their hands off.' Yes, recalls Yves Zurstrassen, 'in those days, some people would have liked painters to be without hands.'

Time has since passed, and many artists have chosen to express themselves through painting despite the cyclical opinions of their ephemeral judges. And if, in 2019, painting remains an extraordinary conceptual and material adventure, it is because painters of all generations, schools and countries have never stopped attempting, developing, and furthering it.

Yves Zurstrassen recalls, 'It was at that moment when I realised that I had to "come out of the forest" to claim our huge visual heritage in all its diversity. Because I thought of the world through painting, I had to find a place, design a studio, a space dedicated to the actualization of my thought. I could not bend to prevailing beliefs. This is how I can explain part of my life and my creation.



Without pretence, I have used many extraordinary moments of the history of this thought: the so-called primitives, Frans Hals, Picasso, Matisse, etc., to revive them, incubate them, bind their shapes to others stemming from other cultures, other eras.'

Perhaps paradoxically, this seclusion convinced Yves Zurstrassen that the most important thing was the company of painters. He decided that some of their forms should infuse his own. In his work, there is a completely specific creation of hybrids that transform into new shapes. They are embodied under our eyes. They are sometimes happy, decorative, sometimes severe,

intense, sometimes memorial and reflective. I am sometimes called to the outside, to a world of expanding energies, and sometimes I am taken inside, in an immersion, a bath criss-crossed with undulating figures. These productive ambivalences can only be attained in the double movement of a concretion, and then of a high-intensity centrifugal expanse.

I have noticed that in spite of the 'well-tempered' balance of his compositions, the order and consistency of his purpose, Yves Zurstrassen often uses the words 'extreme', or 'pushed to the extreme'. I again recall this sentence from one of our conversations: 'When I find a process or a tool, I push it to the extreme to know all that it can produce, then I discard it. I wait for it to recharge.' This breathing, this way of being between 'charge and discharge' in the heart of the action, this breathing in the enunciation of the painting can only result

from a daily, solitary, preserved experience. This is the price to be paid for reaching the required intensity. Every day, the search for this intensity is at the expense of the risk that we already mentioned. Painting produces language, but Yves Zurstrassen reminds us that, before that, the painting is mute. It is defined by a 'white' or a 'black', or a 'hole' that it imposes on us. In speeches, it is when the statement is silent — the comments — during these moments of silence, that paintings and their modes of existence are constructed.

'I am self-taught', as Yves Zurstrassen reminds us. 'I'm not an intellectual who projects painting. The painting guides me, teaches me what I know, what I am. The painting allows me to reach a form of

knowledge.' He incarnates his thought by developing, for hours on end, his technique of collage and *décollage*, which responds to his desire to reach ever deeper, at the very heart of the painting, to this ultra-thin space that he seeks, towards this dissolution of the materiality of the collage, all the while preserving his poetic and aesthetic vision and pushing this visual practice 'to the extreme'. The painting, a 'theatre of operations', takes him to this space that is his own, where he manipulates the heterogeneities of the surfaces and the forces of friction between assemblages to reach a state of weightlessness, and the aerial quality of the elements bought into play.

This process of metamorphosis is even more paradoxical in that it marries the sculptural and visual dimensions in the aim of making us experience the tactile



reality of the weight and masses while delivering us to their immaterial and mental dimension. This oxymoron creates a quality and a language specific to Yves Zurstrassen's space. We now inhabit a world where weightlessness and gravity belong to the same era, which implies a new way of moving in the universe. Today, the state of the space and the bodies it welcomes has taken on its true dimension. It has given an astonishing strength to the work he has completed in the past ten years. This strength and this freedom build a form of pleasure, joy and jubilation. Is it a distant heritage of Matisse? Here is a search for and an expression of a joy of forms.

Having passionately traversed the history of art, playing with all sorts of inspirations, I find that Yves Zurstrassen's oeuvre is not dissolved, but to the contrary, it is more defined, fortified: 'Painting is the healing force of the universe.' Thus, the question is not that of a philological analysis, detail after detail, to understand the formation of this vision, but the apprehension of a movement that unites aesthetics and ethics manifested by a praxis. It is not a question of excavation or archaeology, but the progress of a mental adventure where the painter looks for a grail whose name is Painting, and is, for him, 'the other name for reality' beyond the history that built it. A door opens wide to an inner space that in turn opens onto the essential rhythms of the universe, one that we can glimpse through the physical sciences. This door opens in the heart of his studio, in the very place of the visual medium where, for more than ten years, each new series has recharged an interrupted dialogue.

In 2019, standing before the artist's extraordinary recent series of yellow paintings, I am witness to the intense blossoming of painting through that very process. I had felt similar intensity before Simon Hantai when he unfolded his canvasses, folded to allow the unveiling of what the painting would ultimately be. Yves Zurstrassen's work puts us on guard, not to precipitate us onto an object, a prey, but to transform us into 'hunters' of unfolding space, 'ringing' like musical notes. The emotion is great when a new space is born, thanks to a creator, a new space that broadens our essential surface.



14.04.11, 2014
Oil on canvas, 190 x 190 cm