

Polyglot Pictorial Programme

Yves Zurstrassen and Contemporary Abstraction

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Anyone who has seen Yves Zurstrassen's current works at first hand in the ideal lighting conditions of his Brussels studio will have been impressed by their freshness and radiant, spatial presence. From the outset of such an encounter – relegating art history considerations to the background in favour of immediate perception – the initial emotions are revealed, and it is the quality of these emotions which often decides what will follow and the intensity of a potential approach. Thus, during a recent visit to the studio, a deep-rooted sense of trust was established in the capacity to represent complex, universal situations; large formats apparently at rest are seemingly charged with a sensual assurance and emanate a profound vitality. The interaction between the shimmering pigments combined with the often Mediterranean chromaticism and the countless pictorial idioms that communicate amongst themselves generated an inherent movement in the work which shattered traditional paradigms and structures, thereby rejecting established relationships. Such reactions are normally quite rarely experienced when frequenting abstract art and demonstrate that a healthy dose of contemporaneity had been administered here to the conventions of non-figurative art, a contemporaneity whose intellectual and material nature still remain to be explored. In the heart of Brussels, a city at the centre of sometimes problematic frictions between the French-speaking and Flemish communities, this was combined with the sense of having chanced upon a place where quite different energies reign, inspired more by New York, which had given rise to this contemporaneity and established this labyrinthine reserve of references on which Yves Zurstrassen draws confidently for his work. To this extent, the visual polyphony we saw perfectly summed up the realities that were being played out here. Hence the absolute need to examine it in order to find the thread which would guide us through this labyrinth.

These references were illuminated by subsequent contemplations, as well as during our conversations, which revealed a quick-witted, highly informed artist, who perfectly masters the various trends of abstraction, from the modern to the contemporary period, and deliberately establishes himself in the post-modern discourse of deconstruction and decollage. Thus during the creation of his work, Yves Zurstrassen has developed various affinities, notably with the informal gesture, with ornamental excess and also the introduction of motifs belonging to mass culture taken from pattern paintings, without fixing them however in a repetitive, commercial "signature". On the contrary, his prolific oeuvre is marked by a great sincerity and rapid changes of perspective. Ruptures and fractures shape these circumvolutions, underpinned by the inherent wisdom of the media age, which knows that nothing is able to lay claim to eternal validity and that under the present conditions, any aspirations of classical abstraction from the modern period in relation to autonomy and the absolute can only be seen as anachronistic. To this

extent, Yves Zurstrassen is equally as opposed to the “heroic” projects of the pioneers, from Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich to Piet Mondrian, as to the projects of the post-war giants Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko, with whom he maintains a highly respectful but nevertheless unbridgeable distance. The artist is interested in the multiple strategies of contemporary abstraction, on which he focuses for extensive phases of his work. Yet he is still highly aware of the numerous ramifications of his European roots and time and again, he stresses the continuity of a pictorial tradition, which ultimately proved to be stronger than all the avant-garde condemnations, in the wake of Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers. Painting’s vitality and resistance have never ceased to fascinate Yves Zurstrassen.

Other names then emerge from this flow of great inspirers and purveyors of impulses: Gerhard Richter of course, but also Jacques Villeglé, Emilio Vedova, etc.

In this context, we can also consider the factor of simultaneity, which refers to how various artists are working at the same time on related issues but only become aware of one another’s work at a much later stage, each one developing their own formal language in an original manner, with common references only appearing fully with the distance of a generation.

Thus three other artists spring to mind, all of whom belong to Yves Zurstrassen’s generation and are living in New York: firstly there is Jonathan Lasker, whose paradigmatic works perfectly illustrate non-figurative representation modes, whilst at the same time assigning particular importance to the internal struggle between presentation and representation, between pictorial and graphic textures, and between the inherent hermeticism of painting and the transparency of the world. Philip Taaffe on the other hand offers an essential contribution to the reinstatement of ornament in art as a “universal language”; his intensely chromatic, pictorial strata create an effective space for the historic and social references of the signs he adopts. Then there is Christopher Wool, whose works combine flat applications of colour, successive superimpositions, spontaneity of gesture and calculation infused with irony, to fascinating effect. These are three artistic attitudes with which Yves Zurstrassen has for a long time felt a certain affinity. He acknowledges the need to take into account these shared elements and this new, abstract painting which calls for the integration of aspects of daily life, the consumer society and media culture as generators of forms and which seeks to reflect social reality in art. However, it would be highly desirable to have some kind of interface with this reality. It is no longer possible to react to this strained relationship between existence and transcendence according to traditional canons of abstraction, by encouraging detachment from the world and a reduction to what is essential and ascetic. On the contrary, the abstraction that is required has to be programmatically open to life. Such abstraction blurs paradigms, overturns purist ambitions and does not fear motifs, ornaments and arabesques. In short, it tends towards the chaos of life.

If we consider his most recent works in the light of these premises, we observe that they comply systematically with this programme or, better still, they give practical expression to it through hybrid eruptions. By way of an example, we would take a work whose title indicates its creation date – a procedure that Yves Zurstrassen

has practised for a long time and which emphasises that any specific thematic or narrative association highlighting a very concrete timeframe is obsolete. With its highly balanced format of figures, *09 04 15* at first appears to the viewer as a surface that has been varnished several times, in which traces of gestural impulses and decollages of openwork motifs subsist and coexist, generating great tension. The major effect arises from the extreme intensity of colours, red and yellow, which evoke incandescence and a blazing of the surface and integrate all the suspended forms in a vertical, thermal surge. The second aspect that stands out is the complexity of the numerous pictorial layers: by means of a complicated process combining tracers of paint and the insertion of ornaments that are subsequently removed, Zurstrassen obtains physical and mental stratifications that could be considered as palimpsests of the present.



09 04 15, 2009
290 x 240 cm
Oil on canvas

The most recent applications cover what already exists and rewrite it; the revealed motifs offer viewpoints to deeper planes. It is important to realise here that with his decollage practice, Yves Zurstrassen can not achieve this complexity of the pictorial organism in progress by recourse to successive constructions, but that he has to effectively work on the basis of an intuited result. Through the application of motifs and ornaments at the beginning of the process, then by covering them layer by layer, the moment where they are carefully detached with tweezers includes a certain element of surprise and unpredictability and operates as a counterpoint in an overall conceptual device. In this way he constantly recreates this productive state half way between intuition and conceptualisation. Furthermore, the pioneers of poster decollage such as Mimmo Rotella and Raymond Hains – artists whom Yves Zurstrassen greatly appreciates – were able to bring about this state when they broke the very smooth continuity of displayed messages by tearing them away and exposing the layers beneath. But unlike them, their successor uses motifs and models that encroach upon the entire ornamental content; he uses forms with Islamic connotations as well as geometric, floral and perforated series. This already inexhaustible repertoire is further extended by means of computer processing: diagonal alignments and infinite mirror effects are printed, like motifs, on fine paper before coming into contact with the canvas, prior to the actual painting. Structures of an extreme complexity therefore arise, whose coloured borders with marked edges reveal the stages of their creation. They are structures

with a formal, hybrid language that does not however acknowledge any hierarchy in the sense of a foreground and a background, nor supremacy or subordination. On the contrary, as in *09 04 15*, we have the impression of an omnipresent simultaneity, a concomitant flow of particles of meaning and signifiers in space and time that appear to correspond to western urban planners' mobility and networking practices, which perhaps predominated at the time this work was created. For it is no accident that the aforementioned thermal surge of colours brings together a state of ecstasy and creative eruption peculiar to moments of freely accepted responsibility inherent to the act of painting. As such, this painting offers an unhindered view into Yves Zurstrassen's private laboratory and the dazzling workings of his imagination.



09 03 04, 2009

220 x 270 cm

Oil on canvas

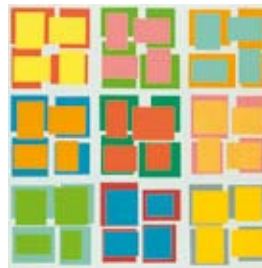
Likewise, the work *09 03 04*, easily identifiable as also belonging to his recent production, offers an impressive demonstration of the tension, albeit discreet and almost lyrical, between the gestural surface treatment and the applications of ornaments that make up the painting. The dominant red/green contrast unfurls subtly to give Mediterranean turquoise tones and fields of mauve. The motifs of closely worked meshes are reminiscent of light reflecting on the cupolas and moucharabies of Moorish architecture; suspended ovals and circles suggest variations of flowers, marine animals and ferns. Reminiscences of gardens and oases structure the viewer's perception and conjure up Klee's poetic paradises and Matisse's luminous interiors in their pictorial memory. Yves Zurstrassen, who makes the most of opportunities to paint in Andalusia and Provence during the summer months, has internalised the references evoked here, of which he is an informed and regular user. This southern influence, due on the one hand to family connections and on the other to consciously chosen affinities, manifestly constitutes a necessary counterpart to his interest for the New York scene and confers on his current work the freshness and vitality mentioned earlier. To this extent, in his recent works Yves Zurstrassen appears to effortlessly combine the most diverse influences, using a visual vocabulary that is literally and metaphorically distinguished by a polyglot dimension, which is consciously aimed at embracing the whole world.

Normally, no artist could have such a broad arsenal of instruments at his disposal from the outset, but first has to develop and enhance it step by step. Without going into detail here of all the abrupt transitions of the path he has followed, two periods are worth mentioning, as they are phases during which Zurstrassen undertook major visual research which, with hindsight, had something of an initiatory nature. The first, which covered the entire 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, was marked by the dominance of dark backgrounds, whose spectrum extended from saturated black to luminous, contrasting areas which nevertheless only permitted an extreme economy of

colour. An aura of seriousness and a profoundly contemplative nature surrounds these works which, from a distance, evoked the *memento mori* of Spanish Baroque painting and paid tribute to more recent works, those of Antoni Tàpies and Pierre Soulages. However, even during this period, the immanent visual tension was already generated by the confrontation between various programmes, emphasised by their mutual differences, with no attempt by the artist to achieve any harmonisation or subordination. By way of example, we would cite here a work called *Ouverture #1*, from 2001. It is a large-format, dark landscape whose surface is stamped with inscriptions and contains exposures of divergent concepts. Gestures of an informal dynamic due to the graphic style of the brushstroke encounter changing pictorial surfaces.



01 09 20
Ouverture #1, 2001
200 x 300 cm
Oil on canvas



03 09 16, 2003
200 x 200 cm
Oil on canvas

Round, organic forms, as if torn by hand in the paper, then pasted and again detached, contrast with the boundary of the rectangle. An opaque black is perforated on a grey background; the composition contrasts with the chaos. During this period, a pictorial language developed between such opposites which in hindsight may appear sincere, but was insufficiently innovative. This deficit clearly made itself felt one day, signalling the start of an experimentation phase using brightly coloured papers, in the spirit of fundamental, visual research. The canvases from this time were covered in serial alignments, superimpositions and gradations suggesting space. However, the contemporary paradigms – of concrete art and Op Art – were subjectively reviewed and assimilated within the production: psychological effects resulting from the perception of colours and shapes, complementary and antagonistic relationships, visual balancing and positioning within the format. Henceforward, the artist's vision was to appropriate other artists, such as Max Bill and Bridget Riley. Everything that could be expressed with elementary, non-figurative means therefore constituted the theme of his work. The piece called *03 09 16*, from 2003, clearly illustrates this: a square format measuring two metres by two metres contains countless brightly coloured structures which generate nine geometric clusters, each composed of two layers consisting of four squares. These structures reframe the spaces between rectangles and squares, the colours appear to range across the entire spectrum of contrasts: complementarity, intensity, simultaneity and succession. Through the balanced distribution of elements on the surface, a great stability reigns over the whole despite the internal tensions; a subtle balance between order and anarchy, between conformity and resistance, operates here par excellence and unexpectedly extends a formal, purposeless game into the realms of social analogy. Seen from this angle, the apparently formal explorations from this period were never confined to self-centred reflection, but sought pathways – whatever impression they gave – towards a contemporary

abstraction that was capable of capturing complexity at the same time as disorientation, specific to the vital, prevailing sentiment.

Today, when Yves Zurstrassen allows his gaze to shift to the carefully ordered frames in his vast studio, to the pots of paint, brushes, models of motifs and other tools and sets to work each day, he has no more ready-made solution, valid for all the artistic, vital problems, than in the past. But he has nevertheless acquired the artistic experience, strength and certainty of having an extensive visual arsenal and knowing how to use it according to requirements and situations. Through decollage motifs and ornaments, he has exploited areas of reality that were inaccessible to traditional abstraction. Through a virtuoso combination of gestural and geometric, expressive and conceptual pictorial programmes, he has acquired a dynamic flexibility with which the world can still be represented. In an intellectual proximity to other artists, he has contributed to this revival of contemporaneity in abstraction which, to cite Jonathan Lasker, has now opened up "to the textures of life".

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