

MOUSSE

I'm Trying All the Angles to Get to the Painting: Bernard Frize

Bernard Frize and Francesco Tenaglia in conversation



Some maintain that producing art from given, precise rules simplifies life. (I am speaking here simply about rules—not ethical schemes with their various aftertastes, but rather a distinct and meditative sturdiness.) Remember Oulipo, the French-speaking writers' congregation that sought new horizons among the constriction of rules? Or Dogme '95, which hinted at the obscene, perverse pleasures in being prone to the lump of subjecting oneself to a Puritan regime? Even the French painter Bernard Frize—to whom the Centre Pompidou is dedicating, in conjunction with an exhibition at Galerie Perrotin, a midcareer retrospective—is often imagined in terms of the constraints and protocols he has

used to produce paintings, while somehow still constantly reinventing his approach over the past four decades: schemes, grids, chromatic combinations, word games, mumbles between horizontal, vertical, and oblique vectors. Yet for Frize, the painter is not a producer of protocols that then he mechanically performs, as in a process. If anything, the opposite is true: the rules are plans, maps, models to imagine yet another assault via painting. To manifest, again, the unlikely miracle of the resurrection: after each death, a new breakfast. After the introduction of new technologies to show facts and tell stories, a canvas—timidly—reappears.

FRANCESCO TENAGLIA: Since your current exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris retraces the various periods of your practice, let's start our discussion with the very beginning of your production.

BERNARD FRIZE: For me, painting has always been a place for developing ideas and reflecting on the history of art and images. It was a connection with the world that I liked. As soon as I started—even when I was a student—I wanted to be part of this world and deal with ideas, society, and philosophy in the same way that great painters like Édouard Manet, Gustave Courbet, and Eugène Delacroix did in their time.

FT: I may be wrong, but I see your practice as a conceptual one—for want of a better term. You bring "into the painting," in an explicit manner, preoccupations pertaining to painting, the history of painting, and theorizations around it, such that all this stuff becomes somehow conceptually malleable as well as actual, physical.

BF: There is always a kind of anachronism when we speak of concept and painting together. For me, Michelangelo and Manet were also very conceptual, even though the definition wasn't used at that time. They were dealing with many components, between which there were ideas. For sure they were dealing with paint, color, surface, but they were also grappling with ideas of, say, an empty painting.

FT: It's always a slippery ground. Of course there has always been a conceptual part to all aesthetic labor, but the use of the word "conceptual" is necessarily historically bound by criticism or art history to an autonomous mode of production, to the existence of the preconditions that make it possible for an audience to read a work as "conceptual." I detect a hybridity in your work, a conceptual approach, but also a strong relation to the history of painting per se. We could speak at length about the processes that generate your work. My sense is that you're operating within a vital and research-oriented practice.

BF: I agree. I think it's like a game. There are rules you have to play by. It is still possible to play Monopoly; it still exists and kids are still playing it. Some people decided, as a power move and a political game, that painting became dead in the 1970s. But painters pushed back against that edict, and in fact it never died. People are still interested in painting. For sure there's a lot of painting that is only ornament or decor, but there are still people practicing seriously in this medium. And today—when the trend is to reconsider or recuperate forgotten artists—we see how many of these artists were interesting, and continue to be interesting. Painting's "death" was just an artifact of a mood and the power of some artists at a particular moment in time.

FT: Monopoly is the same forever. Football is always the same.

BF: Yes, absolutely.

FT: But you can't say that in art because—until not so many decades ago, and surely in the mainstream discourse around visual art—there was the predominant idea that every single work has to be a discrete advancement toward the future—somehow "new" and "innovative." Most casual art criticism you hear at shows is along the lines of "this is derivative" or "some other artist has done it before."

BF: It's always linked to ideology, newness, and trends.

FT: It's also linked to political agendas. Do you have a political agenda? What do you think you can do with art?

BF: It's a difficult question. Especially because most of what we see today as political in art is mainly about denunciation. I think politics is something else. Politics means being in it together.

FT: As in "policy"?

BF: Exactly. Political art is something that brings us together. Quite distant from exploitation. I don't dare speak about my work in this direction, so I won't elaborate too much. It was one of the main reasons why I stopped painting after School of Art, because I could not find a way to express my political ideas in the painting itself. I think it was Vladimír Vladimirovič Majakovskij who said that before being political, a work of art has to be a work of art. I first try to make a work of art, and if this work of art is significant, and politically animate, this will be after, when the work itself is not front and center. Only then will it be a denunciation.

FT: In the catalogue for your current exhibition at Centre Pompidou, curated by Angela Lampe, one word resonated with me, related to the fact that you gradually removed figuration from your practice. This word is "demiurge," coming from Neoplatonic ideas of painting as a morally dubious mimicking of something perfect.

BF: I have a peculiar attitude toward painting. I don't like making complicated things that people don't understand. I paint mainly on small canvases that people are not diving into, so there is no way to adore anything. I try to make things understandable as much as I can, to enable people to participate. On one hand it's linked to political issues, but on the

other I think the joy I have from my painting practice comes from sharing it.

FT: I am curious to know more about your interest in Italian-ness.

BF: I lived in Rome for two years. I was lucky to have the chance to walk the scaffolding of the Michelangelo's Cappella Sistina while it was being restored, and I saw all the colors coming out. It was an incredible experience. I had many restorer friends at that time in Rome, and I learned a lot from them. I also lived seventy kilometers from Turin and traveled quite a bit in Italy, for instance to Pompeii, where I learned a lot. I came to admire Gino De Dominicis and Arte Povera. When I applied to art school I quoted Jannis Kounellis. What was interesting for me in his work was this idea of adding a layer to an existing stratification, and it was really that simple. I adopted that idea for myself, because I thought, I want to be contemporary but I don't want to forget about the past. When you start painting, it's like establishing a socket in an electrical system: you are plugged into the past. But you also have to switch off your lamp for the day. This is what works for me, my goal.

FT: In several reviews of your work I notice a strong emphasis on the rules you adopt to produce it. Sometimes the rules are interpreted like *they* are your art. It seems to me like a misreading.

BF: No, my work is absolutely not mechanical. It's not like a recipe most of the time. I like a sort of recipe at the beginning, but the result is not coherent. It's not actually a process. When you wake up in the morning, the only thing that makes you stand up is that you want to do something. To do it, you have to organize your life, you have to organize what you are going to paint, you have to start in order to begin with something. It's not process-oriented, it's just putting things together in order to start creating.

FT: I noticed that you refer sometimes to gravity as a help, an enabler. Could you expand on this?

BF: I try to use all I can. Sometimes gravity is fun because I'm mainly painting flat and the paint I use is liquid. I think there is no progression in my work. It is always the same; it just has several angles. I'm trying all the angles to get to the painting.

FT: Has the show at Centre Pompidou incited reflection on the decades of your work?

BF: I don't know yet; it's too soon to say. A lot of paintings are missing from the exhibition, but on the other hand it includes paintings that have not been shown in the past, so most people do not yet know them. I am pleased with the result, and I hope it will give visitors a good introduction to my work.

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