



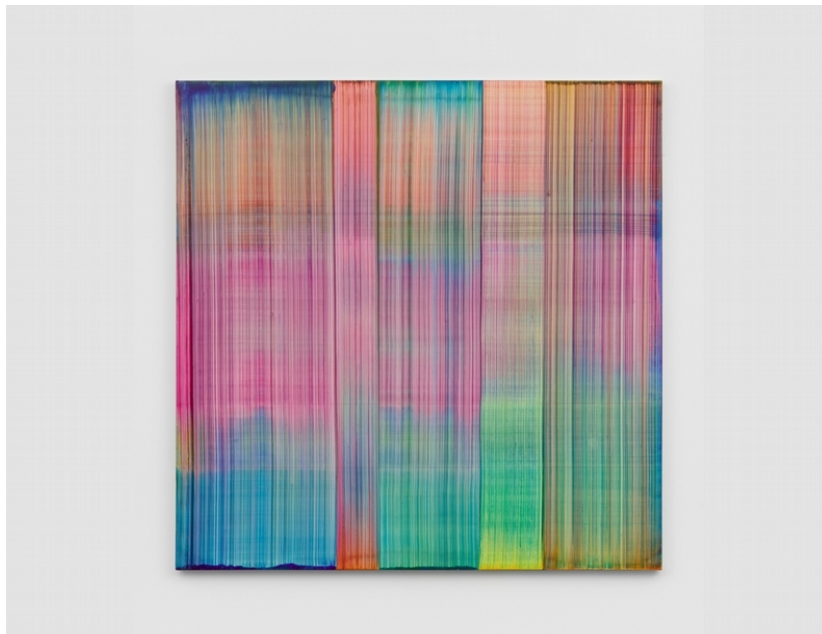
Bernard Frize: 'Looking at my painting is an intellectual activity'

Written by | Yu Xiaohui

Bernard Frize's works require viewers' active engagement, to watch and to trace the gestures and processes of how the image was generated: the traverse of paintbrushes on canvas, the juxtaposition of different colours, the relationship between lines which would entangle, intertwine, and then appear to be seen as grids and meshes. "An adorning and delightful painting talks not only to the eyes, but also to the mind. The beauty of the painting would be meaningless unless it resorts to human intelligence and provokes curiosity. Looking at my painting is an intellectual activity."

In last June, the Centre Pompidou, the paramount of modern and contemporary art in France, held a retrospective of Bernard Frize's career. By featuring more than 60 of his iconic paintings from 1977 through 2019, the organisers chronologised and presented his 40 years of creative life, as he has been hailed as "the inevitable French painter in the international art world".

Frize has long been known for his idiosyncratic way of setting rules in his creative process, as well as his uses of basic and traditional elements of painting, i.e. painting on canvas at easels with common paints and tools (acrylic paint, resin, ink, paintbrush, roller, spray gun, etc.), to render a rich and amazing variety of appearances, styles and techniques as seen in his works.



Bernard Frize's "Bachi" , Acrylic paint, resin, canvas, 122x122cm, 2019 (© artist and Simon Lee Gallery)

From "Sunday Painter" to the icon of French new painting

The world of Frize's picture is colourful with ever-changing compositions: thick and thin lines intersect vertically to form different styles of grids; loose curves meander into knots, braids, spirals, swirls, or some visually indefinable maze; multi-coloured circular blocks, random splashes and spots scatter and combine. Some fancy illusions of colours resemble an oriental ink-wash-styled landscape. Some pictures are delicate and complicated that people can't help but admire the artist's exquisite skills. Some are large and subtle with jerky strokes that exude innocent and childlike happiness. All these paintings of richly diverse styles come from the same person!

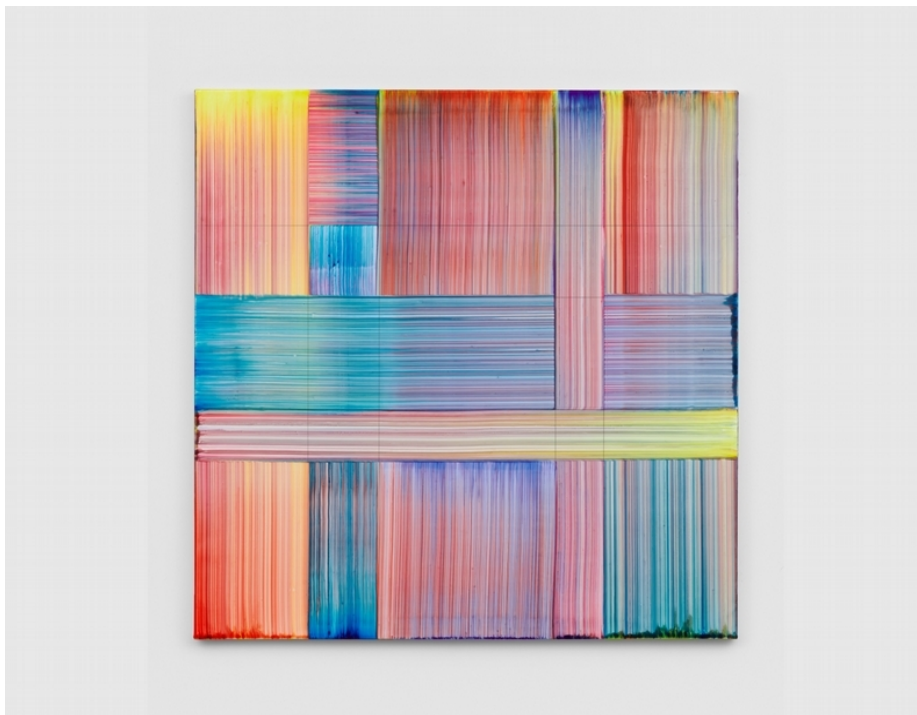
Many of his paintings are attached with short descriptions explaining his methods of painting and how certain scenes in his life inspired him. Those methods could be simple. They could also be complicated, and even weird: drawing a continuous line detouring on the canvas, using a huge brush made of 15 paintbrushes bound together to illustrate the possible paths of the knight on the chess board, applying patterned rollers dipped with paints and rolling all over the canvas, drawing random "U"s continuously and changing the previously used colour at the moment when the "U"s collide, applying different pigments layer by layer on the canvas and then scraping it meticulously with a knife, putting the dried paint collected from the paint can on the canvas, and more.



Bernard Frize at his studio in Berlin in 2016. (Photo by Olivier Zahm, Source: Purple Magazine)

Frize moved to and settled in Berlin more than a decade ago. He was born in Saint Mendé, an eastern suburb of Paris in 1949. He became known in the art circle in France since late 1970s. Once he majored in painting when he attended some art schools in Aix-en-Provence and Montpellier in southern France, but decided to give up painting and drop out without graduation, since he thought he could not find his way of painting to respond to the political and social upheaval at that time. To make a living, he went to Paris to work at a screen printing factory and serve some artists such as Pierre Soulages and Tetsumi Kudo. It was only until 1976 he picked up his paintbrush again and made art on Sunday when he was off duty.

Right from the beginning, Frize gave up the traditional perspective projection. Instead he took up the "All-over" treatment of abstract expressionism as discussed by the American critic Clement Greenberg — putting patterns on the entire canvas without visual focus — by using some very slender paintbrush (a traînard) to draw numerous parallel, vertical and intersected colourful lines all over the canvas, which looked like the interlace of yarns rendering a beautiful illusion with tension and dynamics. Such continuous and nearly mechanical lines seemed absurd but also in Zen alike style. He used such technique to make his series. In 1977, just one year after he restarted painting, he was invited to participate in an exhibition at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris / ARC, the holy site of contemporary and experimental art. Frize quickly ascended in the art world ever since, as he was snapped up by galleries in Paris and his works were shown in exhibitions around the world as an icon of French new paintings.



Bernard Frize's "Flagt", acrylic paint, resin, canvas, 122x122cm, 2019 (© artist and Simon Lee Gallery)

Dispelling the myths of the artist and the painting behaviour

In the 1970s, the art circles in France as well as the entire Europe were dominated by conceptual art that urged on dematerialisation, as well as the pursuit of minimalism. Under an atmosphere of "the painting is dead", Frize was one of the few practitioners loyal to painting. This slim and elegant man liked to keep a low profile. He once said "I chose painting not because I wanted to provoke, but it was the most interesting medium. I like visiting art galleries to see paintings, and I like to paint. That's all." In the late 1970s, a number of new trends of painting (such as the German neo-expressionism, the Italian trans-avant-garde) emerge in Europe in order to confront the mainstream ideas as well as minimalism. However, Fritz's interest was a far cry from those rationales which emphasised on self-expression and personal emotions. He worked hard to break through the common understandings and expectations on art and rejected the sacred aura for artists-as-creators. He opposed sensationalism. He advocated that the purpose of painting was not expressing oneself, and had nothing to do with personal emotions and subjective consciousness.

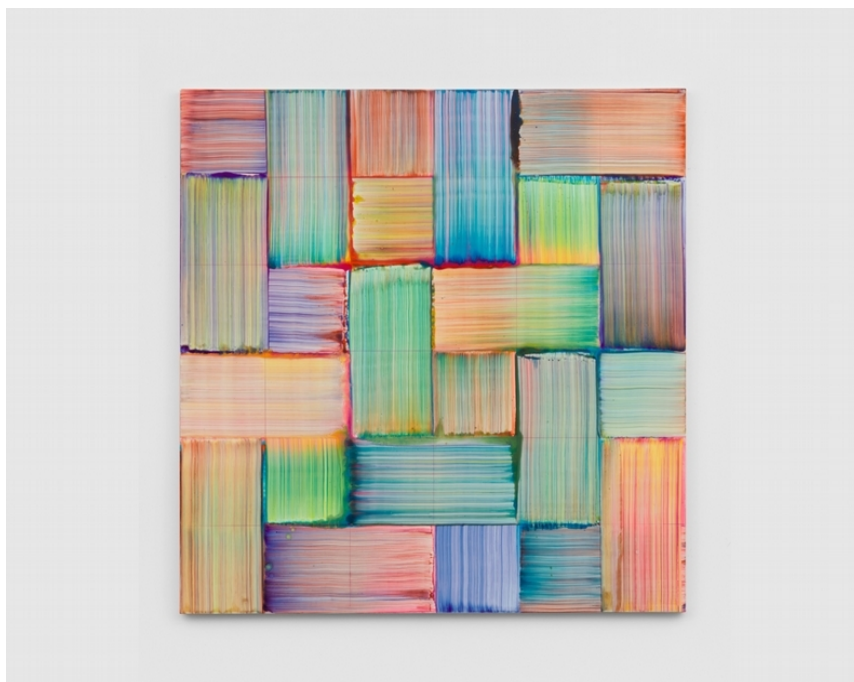
He reckoned "Painting to me is a pursuit, but it is also a labour. Any labour would naturally reveals the sensitivity and personality of the workers. It doesn't need to emphasise on individual expression, nor be taken as something to show off deliberately." To let the viewers know how he would use his tools, he has been going through constant change of techniques and styles. Sometimes he would work with assistants as a collective in order to get rid of the concepts of "originality" and "personal style", so that the myths of an artist and their painting behaviour would be dispelled, as he pondered "the market always demands artists to produce the same images, symbols, or styles, because people don't really look at paintings, they just want to recognise the paintings."



Bernard Frize's "Hops", acrylic paint, resin, canvas, 122x122cm, 2019(© artist and Simon Lee Gallery)

It seems that Frize has lived a life with contradictions: In his school days, he read foreign art magazines and visited exhibitions all over Europe. He acquired knowledge from the streams of the avant-garde movement, including Fluxus, the Japanese Gutai, Minimalism and so on. He would pursue the art that stood at the forefront of his time that was deemed "elitist". However, he also firmly believed in left-wing Marxism and advocated universal values and social reform. He tried to unseat the artists at the altar of being worshipped. After all, he has resolved such contradiction with his simple and low-key approach: painting as labouring "not different from what factory workers do". The focus of painting has been meant to shift, from expression (self or emotional) and representation (of the objective world), to the "production" of painting, generating non-personal and non-subjective abstract paintings through a predetermined process.

Frize stated that he was not the only one who would make ruled-based paintings. He was actually influenced by the trend of his time. The ideas of rules and process were inspired by the literary experiments of the "workshop of potential literature" (Oulipo) . At the same time, those have been core principles in other realms such as science or industrial manufacturing. Paradoxically, despite rules appearing to be constraints and boundaries, they set him free and allowed him to break away from usual creative practices, and so let the choices of theme, composition and colour be absent. The action of painting itself could be more focused. Indeed, the constraints concerning materials and techniques could lead to unexpected images. If the image Frize has produced is said to be customarily colourful, this could be conceived as a purely objective existence, rather than his subjective creation. He declared "I want to use all the colours in a more free way to get some unexpected results. It brings more joy and surprises than the process itself. This is the reason why I am interested in painting." In fact, he has used a wide range of colours from the beginning to avoid choosing any colour. To him, colours do not carry symbolic meaning, nor aesthetic taste, but are the tools for illustrating strokes and separating different strokes.

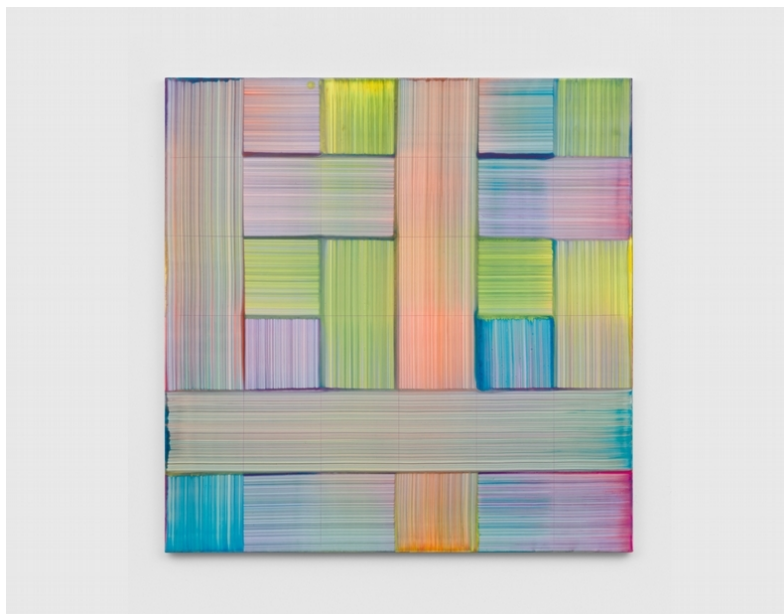


Bernard Frize's "Pind", acrylic paint, resin, canvas, 122x122cm, 2019(© artist and Simon Lee Gallery)

Contradictions and absurdities among randomness, chances, and rules

As a "painter," Frize has spent his energy and time on setting rules and tools for painting. After that, he would let patterns emerge organically according to his rules. He would accept, or even expect random and incidental situations (for example, pigment drippings, wrinkles and cracks after drying, penetrations and diffusions between different colours, etc.) And he would look forward to "contradictions and absurdities between randomness, chances, and rules". Setting preliminary outlines, formulating rules and procedures could be regarded as a highly conceptual, intellectual and lengthy process (He sometimes tried dry-runs on the computer). Once he has commenced the execution, the strokes would swim like a fish. Occasionally it would take less than 10 minutes to finish a piece of painting, thanks to his own exquisite techniques.

Regardless of his ever-changing rules, Frize has aimed to provide a new and disparate interpretation for painting as a medium, and to unveil the mystery of the creative process by showing the materiality of his works. He claims "I want to be as clear as possible so that people can understand the content of the painting at first glance, and never get bored after watching it for a long time. I hope my painting could live with people and remain its vivid status as ever." Every time he paints, the process of his creation would be recorded and shown without disguise as if the actions he is undertaking are already in the context of performance arts. His works require viewers' active engagement, to watch and to trace the gestures and processes of how the image was generated: the traverse of paintbrushes on canvas, the juxtaposition of different colours, the relationship between lines which would entangle, intertwine, and then appear to be seen as grids and meshes. "An adorning and delightful painting talks not only to the eyes, but also to the mind. The beauty of the painting would be meaningless unless it resorts to human intelligence and provokes curiosity. Looking at my painting is an intellectual activity." reckons Bernard Frize.



Bernard Frize's "Psian", acrylic paint, resin, canvas, 122x122cm, 2019(© artist and Simon Lee Gallery)

Frize's paintings drift through the boundaries of figuration and abstraction. His seemingly abstract pictures sometimes evoke associations with certain objects (plaids, curtains, fabrics, braids, landscapes, etc.) while his figurations often appear in a completely abstract form. Although he has emphasised on the process, he is different from most of the "process artists". To him, the process has not been the purpose, but the way to highlight the order and the materiality of the sensory experience constituted in paintings. He has taken the aesthetic value of the "consequences" (i.e. the works) seriously, and would not hesitate to destroy the works. He once claimed "If the painting is ugly, the line is not straight enough and the colours become turbid, I would destroy it. Sometimes I destroy one among ten, sometimes I destroy all ten." He has also refused to make modifications on paintings to defend his honesty in creation.

Frize has created his works by making series: one specific method of creation is used in each series. In a limited range of pre-set rules, he would use various ways of painting to seek change, such as reversing a cycle, and also exhausting the possibilities of composition rendered through the corresponding method. He once explained "I draw in series in order to find their ways out by exhausting their possibilities that would eventually give birth to a new series. Sometimes I re-use the rules from the old series because I have found the possibility of re-interpretation. Even simple diagonal lines and crossovers could produce unexpected results. I'll keep trying, otherwise I'll be bored." Sometimes the remains of one series is recycled to form another series (for example, another canvas is placed under the canvas in progress, and the dripping paint becomes the beginning of the next series of paintings). In this sense, different series appear to be coherent and echo each other.



Bernard Frize's "Sedy", acrylic paint, resin, canvas, 122x122cm, 2019(© artist and Simon Lee Gallery)



Bernard Frize's "Sega", acrylic paint, resin, canvas, 122x122cm, 2019(© artist and Simon Lee Gallery)

At this time round at Taipei Dangdai, Simon Lee Gallery will present a number of Frize's new works, showing his continuous interpretation of the common compositions in his paintings with grids and braids. Rendered by large brushes, the canvas is divided into strip-shaped planes with different gradients and unequal length. They intersect and form fascinating combinations. These multi-layered works show the combination of exquisite skills, precise compositions and expressive colours. The subtle hues produced by the mix of acrylic pigments and resins compose an image of staturated colouring. Frize has been using the mixture of acrylic pigments and resins for long time. The texture of those pigments makes the picture as bright and smooth as a photo, which could be attractive but may also turn the viewers away. Such effect would be appreciated, as that would evoke a sense of distance and prompt the viewer to stand at a position where is not superior or inferior to the work. Nevertheless, his colourful and fascinating paintings actually encompass critical thoughts and challenging strategies. As written on the wall in a room of his retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, he explained "I always try to put more than just one thing in the painting: one thing is shown, but there are paradoxes and oppositions inside." From the mid-1970s onwards, with his perseverance and consistency in attempting new techniques and rules over the past 40 years, Frize has still been exploring in the immense potential and possibilities of painting.