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BERNARD FRIZE



liquid politics

interview and photography by OLIVIER ZAHM

All artworks courtesy of Atelier-Bernard Frize. Bernard Frize wears a wool suit jacket BRIONI

Bernard Frize began a career as a painter in the mid-1970s, a time when conceptual art was flourishing, painting's intellectual currency was in decline, especially in France, and postmodernism and photography-based art were emerging.

As if to combine Marxist perspective with the calculating lens of conceptual art, Frize systematized a painting process using planned gestures, imbricated patterns, geometric motifs, an arbitrary palette of acrylic colors, and an overall visual design. There have been times when he engaged the help of others for complex compositions, but mostly, for the past four decades, he alone has pushed the envelope of abstraction and gesture in paintings that are at once visual, conceptual, and contemporary.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *When did you start painting?*

BERNARD FRIZE — I went to the École des Beaux-Arts in Aix-en-Provence and in Montpellier in 1969, and in fact never graduated. But I really started in '76, after a 10-year break. My first exhibition was in 1977.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What was the reigning discourse in painting at the time?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I'm very much a product of my time – a very agitated and politicized time both in and outside of the art world.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *A time of revolutionary inspiration.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Right, exactly. I was politically militant back then, and as a result I found myself in quite a bind. I was unable to express my political engagement and social concerns through my paintings.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, it was out of a sense of political integrity that you decided to stop painting for a decade?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. I couldn't find a way to imbue my art with my political interests. In other words, I didn't want to just illustrate my political convictions in painting. Nor did I want to do apolitical parlor painting. I wanted to find a way to integrate into my art an approach to painting that was in phase with my political ideas. Otherwise, better to quit.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *How did you solve the problem of developing a political kind of painting that wasn't illustrative, but abstract?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I went back to painting when I found a way to formulate my political engagement. I channeled my engagement through nonpersonal, nonsubjective methods of painting.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Painting was under assault at the time, often considered "bourgeois."*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, absolutely. But in France, people didn't know much about it and were certainly unaware of what was going on in Germany and the United States. With me, it was the opposite – I was overinformed! I traveled as much as possible. I'd go to documenta. I saw [Harald Szeemann's 1969 exhibition] "When Attitudes Become Form." I'd find a way to attend all the exhibitions, wherever they were, even if I lacked the means. So, I knew there was something happening in painting, and for me it wasn't happening in France. France was mostly the School of Paris. There wasn't much painting aside from that – maybe Supports/Surfaces.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You needed to get around, to go see what was going on.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Absolutely. Everywhere in Europe. Not just in Germany, but also in Switzerland and Holland. The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, for example, was publishing a great review that showed a lot of American art. And I was lucky enough to have a teacher at the Beaux-Arts who spoke four or five languages and had subscriptions to art reviews from all over the world.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *At the time, it was hard for exhibitions to travel between countries, and hard to find foreign magazines.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Right. There weren't any around.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You had to take the train or go by car.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Me, I was poor. Sometimes I had to take a moped to get to Holland.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Really! Three days on a moped?*

BERNARD FRIZE – That's right. [Laughs] Art was a commitment for me. Obviously, I had to find other ways to paint. I couldn't understand how anybody could still be doing heavy compositions or even abstract paintings. What interested me was Fluxus. It was Gutai, in Japan. It was American art. It was conceptual art. And so on. And all that stuff took time to formulate in painting.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *But your attachment to the medium never wavered?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Oh, never. It was the only medium that interested me. Doubtless for its limits. And then, also, because of the pleasure I got from looking at paintings from all eras. For example, since I was in Montpellier, the Musée Fabre was an extraordinary thing, with all those Courbets, and the Impressionist paintings of Frédéric Bazille, and other marvels. And since I was always traveling, I saw pretty much everything there was to see in terms of museums.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You took in the entire history of painting.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Absolutely. My taste runs to Delacroix, Manet, the Impressionists. It undoubtedly sounds pretentious to say this, but I was looking for a way to be modern in painting, a way to be contemporary with my time, as the Impressionists had been in the 19th century. At the same time, because the revolution – as we believed – was supposed to come from the working class, I wanted to work out my painting in an extremely modest way. I wanted to turn out art that wouldn't distinguish itself from the work of a factory worker. In other words, there was an ambivalence in me – a duality, a contradiction. I wanted to be on the cutting edge of my time and at the same not be different from others, not be an artist in an ivory tower.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, the working class was also a point of reference that steered your reflections on painting.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, absolutely. For me it was both a reference point and a reality. When I left Montpellier to come to Paris and earn my living, from 1970 to 1976, I worked as a printer in a silk-screening shop. I printed for artists, but I was a real laborer.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *When did you return to your art?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Little by little. I started in '76-'77, in my

spare time, outside my working hours, mostly on Sundays.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You discovered a Paris that has since become the stuff of legend, Paris in the early '70s, with its intellectual and artistic effervescence.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Well, first of all, you have to realize that nobody had a telephone. [Laughs] There was a four- or five-year wait to get a telephone in your place! You'd go to the post office to place a call. Few people had bathrooms. You'd wash in the common bathroom on your floor. You'd eat at cafés for a song. You'd live outside. It's got nothing to do with the Paris of today. It was a completely different world.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, how did things happen? In cafés, at night?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, usually in cafés or nightclubs, but I was broke, so I couldn't really go out much. It was more often the artists I worked for at the time who'd give me a break and lend a hand. I worked for Tetsumi Kudo, Pierre Soulages, and a bunch of artists who nowadays are unknown.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You took up painting back up in 1977.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, and right away I was invited to take part in the Ateliers de l'ARC, directed by Suzanne Pagé at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The ARC workshops were a turning point for you?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Absolutely. It was a springboard for me.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What was it that suddenly made you understand just then that you had something to say or had a place in contemporary painting?*

BERNARD FRIZE – It was first of all my desire to get back on my feet. The conviction that I always wanted to paint. Then it was a reaction against the situation at that time. It seemed to me that all the artists in the world of abstract painting were doing monochromes, in every color and thickness!

OLIVIER ZAHM – *But that was also the era of [the art group] BMPT, which sparked a revolution in painting in France!*

BERNARD FRIZE – Surely, but they're so dogmatic and sectarian that I just can't summon much enthusiasm for it. When it comes to French painters, I'm more interested in Fluxus people. I'm more amused if Robert Filliou dusts off the Mona Lisa at the Louvre. I don't mean to denigrate the influence of Niele Toroni, Buren, Michel Parmentier, and Olivier Mosset [the founders of BMPT] in the late '60s, but I find that their attitude quickly changed in the '70s. They quickly assumed a position of power.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, what was your position in 1977, during the punk movement?*

BERNARD FRIZE – For one thing, I didn't believe in the myth of the painter. I wanted nothing to do with the figure of the painter as set apart from the rest, the painter as cursed poet,

tortured soul, visionary, or even star.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The painter is, for you, more of a depersonalized machine, in the manner of Warhol, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's Anti-Oedipus?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Not that, either. The painter isn't a machine. He's someone who tries to understand the world and translate his analysis into a painting, onto a canvas.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Would you say it's an analytical position?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Not in the Freudian sense, but an analysis of the world and a deliberate distancing from personal ego.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And this understanding, you think, does not rule out a political perspective, even if that perspective isn't made explicit? Even if there's no political message in your paintings?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Right. That's the aspiration. An artist's life is made of contradictions, of course, and it's these contradictions that prompt the painter's decisions as to what to paint. We spend our time dealing with our contradictions. There are bound to be contradictions in me, and I don't presume to tell anyone else what to do.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *For you, abstract art is not to be dissociated from political meaning.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Not for me, at any rate, especially back then. I think things are different now. First off, the world has changed a lot. But art has also gone to a different place.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The whole sphere of art has shifted from the periphery, from the underground, to the center of cultural and social life?*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's shifted to the center of the world of money, and the world of money has itself shifted. Therefore, taking a political stand today is a totally different affair. And it can now be quite difficult to express in art.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You no longer have a revolutionary position?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Let's say I keep my distance. At the same time, I try to be very loyal. I'm loyal to my medium and its demands.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What do you mean by loyalty in painting?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I mean that I don't ever cheat. No cosmetics and no touch-ups. I always try to be loyal to those things.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And you're still critical of developments in the world.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, of course.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Well, then, how does that translate into your work? You work in series, right?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, that's often the case. But there are also hapaxes, things that exist by themselves. Anyway, a series is just a way to exhaust an idea. In fact, it's the result of the exhaustion that generates the series.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Do you still work with a team?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I worked for years with assistants because I was trying to set up collective procedures – procedures in which I was not the boss. I was trying to find ways to work that required several people around a single canvas. There were multiple people painting the same canvas simultaneously. It was a matter of solving rhythmic problems, working out brush crossings, above and below – a bit like problems with passing trains. I was looking for principles of collective production where each painter took on his responsibility, without any hierarchy. I would distribute the brushes, decide which sizes to use, and decide on the formula.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *But you were still the painting's author?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Of course. And it ended up causing problems with my assistant over the signature and money, so now I work alone.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *I see that you've got your blank canvases laid flat in your studio.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. I paint on canvas laid flat. And my paint is very liquid. I don't want thickness. It has to dry flat. But it also makes for a different dynamic. I don't think in terms of vision or perspective. I think in terms of the action of painting.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *It's the gesture, the pictorial act, that counts?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Let's say it's more about the making of the canvas. I'm not working in Expressionism, or in representation.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Does it comes from Pollock?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. The "flatbed" is an old idea. It's not something I invented – far from it! The expression comes from Rauschenberg, I think! For my part, anyway, it stems from working with a very nonviscous resin; if I tilted the canvas, it would all run.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Drips aren't your thing.*

BERNARD FRIZE – No. [Laughs] Since I like to work with very fine, transparent, very liquid colors, it's simpler to work flat. I always paint with a damp resin.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *No oil paint.*

BERNARD FRIZE – No. It's an acrylic resin. I did a few oil paintings in Berlin, but only because in Berlin there's nothing in the way of materials for artists. That might seem surprising for a city of artists! Nowadays, I import my materials from France to carry on with my work.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Where do you get your ideas?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Matisse used to say, "The ideas come from my work."

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Have your ideas evolved much?*

BERNARD FRIZE – No. I think what I ended up doing early on was setting up a toolbox that I still draw things from. I'm still working with ideas I developed in the beginning, but that I try to reformulate in a new way every time. That's what allows me to progress. Because I think there's a great coherence to my work, even if the images I produce are in the end all different.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Let's talk brushes, your choice of brushes. The brushstroke – or, better yet, the brush's path – is very visible in your paintings.*

BERNARD FRIZE – For me, the brush is a container, like a paint can. It holds a certain amount of paint. And I generally try to use that quantity up entirely and stop when there's no more paint in the brush. It's as simple as that.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The width of the brush is less a stroke width than a quantity of paint to spread on the canvas, and therefore a stroke length?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Not necessarily. Brushes can hold more or less paint, and you can make a stroke of greater or lesser length depending on the paint held in the brush. In general, I select the size of my brush by the size of my canvas. It's a proportion to fill the canvas.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Do you set principles for painting?*

BERNARD FRIZE – One of my principles, for example, is to fill the canvas in one shot.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You paint a canvas in one shot!*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. Very fast painting. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM – *How long does it take you to do a canvas?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Not even 10 minutes! What takes a while is narrowing down the idea ahead of time, defining exactly what I'm going to do and by what system. Once I know how I'm going to do the painting, I paint very fast.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Do you practice on paper first?*

BERNARD FRIZE – No, no! I go straight to the canvas. My use of paint is too specific. I can't do preparatory sketches.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What motivates you to make a painting? Colors, brush size, a motif, the size of the canvas?*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's true that the size of the canvas is important.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And then the drawing or the circuit of the paint, but can we properly speak of a drawing?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Necessarily so! The edges of the brush, at least, do make a drawing.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And how do you decide on that?*

BERNARD FRIZE – In advance! But it's more a matter of circulation, of movement, than a proper drawing. On this canvas, for example, there are big Us. And every time a U crosses paths with another U, I change colors.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You set up rules rather than a motif?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. I set up simple little rules like that, and they give me my composition. Or, rather, the order of the composition, the order of the canvas.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You end up with an almost musical notation, then, with rhythms and movements on the canvas.*

BERNARD FRIZE – That's one way to put it. It'd be a pictorial score more than a musical composition.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And how do you then select your colors within those rules?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I don't worry about colors at all.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The colors you use are arbitrary?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. It's completely immaterial to me. What interests me about color is that it allows me to name this or that stroke and keep track of it. I change colors when I change lines. It's like a subway map. I use a lot of colors – a whole slew of them, actually – but in a way that avoids decisions about color.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Is this an anti-aesthetic reflex?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, perhaps. Anti-subjective, in any case. It allows me to distance myself from all the choices. In other words, I can opt not to choose.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You deny yourself a choice!*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes! I don't want to have to choose colors. But I want to paint with as many colors as possible, indifferently. This probably goes back to 1977 – as I was saying a little while back – when to me everybody seemed to be doing monochromes, when everybody was choosing the color that would become his trademark: blue for Yves Klein, black for Soulages, white for Ryman, etc. I told myself I didn't feel like choosing, and I didn't have to choose.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You said to yourself: "All the colors are mine!" and "Indifference to color is mine!"*

BERNARD FRIZE – And: "The nonchoice, all mine!"

OLIVIER ZAHM – *But your paintings are paradoxically very colorful. If there's pleasure in color, that pleasure is in your paintings.*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's become a problem now. It's started to become my trademark, and I've always refused to have a visual signature. I don't know how I'm going to solve this problem, but I hope to solve it someday.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You don't choose the colors you use, but once they've been arbitrarily decided on, do you work out their blends, their combinations, their harmonies and contrasts?*

BERNARD FRIZE – No. There again, the colors mix on the canvas. It's automatic.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You have no color scheme in mind from the beginning?*

BERNARD FRIZE – No. I don't compose. It's chance that decides. But the flipside of that coin is that, most of the time, the people who buy my paintings match them to their curtains.
[Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, the procedure you set up determines the pictorial result. Do you consider yourself in that sense a conceptual artist?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I'm not sure that's a word I can lay claim to. It doesn't quite fit me. I think conceptual art is above all the use of language in art. And, me, I use acrylic paint.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Do you title your series?*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's generally my assistants who classify the paintings and come up with titles.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Oh, really? They do as they like?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. They do pretty much any old thing. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Do they ask your opinion?*

BERNARD FRIZE – More or less. Sometimes not at all.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The title is also unimportant?*

BERNARD FRIZE – You need titles to be able to find the paintings. But it could easily be numbers. For me, titles are strictly a matter of classification.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *So, you don't consider yourself a conceptual artist, but your procedures, the way you predetermine your paintings with rules, are fairly...*

BERNARD FRIZE – ... planned out.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Right. The procedures for making a painting determine its composition. In this way, you run counter to all*

spontaneity or expressionism.

BERNARD FRIZE – Surely. Me, I try to be absent. I try to absent myself from my paintings.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The pictorial process is more important than the painter?*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's not that, either! I always try to make my paintings sufficiently "opaque," in the sense Louis Marin used to talk about. I mean that the process shouldn't be the object of the painting, either. The process is just what allows you to produce the painting. It's neither the object nor the subject of the painting.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *The process should absent itself as well.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. It, too, goes absent from the painting. It becomes transparent or invisible.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Like the painter himself.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And you don't want thickness in your painting. Because thickness is somehow – what? Subjectivity? Sensuality?*

BERNARD FRIZE – That's it, yes. I think that when there's thickness in the paint, when there's colored material to block your gaze, you plunge into the paint. And it seems to me that a cold, flat surface is a surface that repels the gaze and keeps the "regardeurs" at a distance. I like for a painting's surface to be glazed, almost photographic, so that it can hold a person looking from a distance – a person like me, the painting's author.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *This is your pictorial ethic.*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's my position. It's the way I want to stand before my painting. And the way I'd like people to stand before my painting. I want to keep a certain distance and prevent any immersion in a bath of color.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *In sensation.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes. In expression, I'd say, in fact.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *But in spite of it all, your way of painting could instead not exclude this materialism.*

BERNARD FRIZE – No. It couldn't *not* exclude it. In fact, I don't know if you're familiar with those paintings of mine from the '80s. I'd use the dry paint at the top of the paint cans. I'd detach it from the cans and just place it on the canvas.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Ah! You'd cut it out and just place it on the canvas?*

BERNARD FRIZE – So, you see, in those paintings there was material. At the same time, though, it was disgusting enough as

a material to rebuffer the pleasure of sensation a bit, the depth of the color.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Is it a kind of irony you have, your way of trapping sensation, using paint that's dried in the can and that a painter would normally throw out because it's become unusable?*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's not irony. It's a quest to "do nothing" or to "let things be." Then, 10 to 15 years later, I did the same thing, but going even further with the principle of using paint that's dried in the can. I made boxes and poured 40 colors into them without mixing. Just poured the colors into the box. Then I waited for the paint to dry on the box's surface. Then, when it was dry enough to be placed on the canvas, I sliced off a fine skin of dried paint. Then I waited for the paint to dry again, to slice off a second skin of paint. And so on, until the paint box was empty and the canvas was covered with paint.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *If I may say so, that's a lot more conceptual.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Let's say that the painting is produced automatically, with minimal intervention from me. I've done whole series like that. There've been big ones, smaller ones. There was a tiny one, with just five paintings in the box.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Those are the paintings that the press has compared with the paintings of Gerhard Richter, simply because it looks like they've been scraped.*

BERNARD FRIZE – The simple act of lifting a skin of paint makes the paint slide. Just a formal resemblance. Because it's totally mechanical. It's never painted, in fact. Moreover, I'd usually leave folds in the skins, precisely to show that the thing was exterior to the canvas. That it wasn't painted onto the canvas.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *What's your view of the art world, or more especially of the world of painting? Because it's very different. You started out at a time when painting, or at least its modernist reduction, was under fire. Now, painting has gone through the Transavantgardes of the '80s and arrived at its present-day explosion, where anything goes. There's a sort of newfound freedom or newfound sense of "whatever." Nobody knows what's going on anymore!*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, absolutely. For my part, I'm holding my course. What's changed, essentially, is the art milieu. That has changed its relationship to painting and made painting into a commodity.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Made it into a commerce of luxury goods?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, right. But the painters are doing the same thing. I think they're all doing their respective work. The only curious thing I see is that painting is no longer in crisis, but neither is it at the center of a debate. It no longer belongs to a community that calls it into question, one way or another.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *We might even say that the debate over painting has all but vanished, or so it seems to me.*

BERNARD FRIZE – That's why I'm in Germany. Because I think there's still a little debate in Germany over art and painting, and I find that interesting. Maybe in the United States, too, but I don't know it as well. I think there are interesting people doing painting in the United States.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *It's true that Germany has a remarkable history with painting, right up to the punk artists, like Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes, of course!

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And how is your work received in Berlin? Do you feel completely foreign in the city and work in isolation, or do you, on the contrary, take part in a community of German artists?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I think I take part in an international community in Berlin, even if I'm content to keep at a certain remove from it. I received a prize in Germany this year. Two years ago, I received another one. I mean to say that my work is recognized there.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *And you've been in Berlin for a while now?*

BERNARD FRIZE – It's been 10 years.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *You're becoming a Berliner at this point. And you speak German?*

BERNARD FRIZE – Very badly! But nobody speaks German. [Laughs] Everyone speaks English! What I mean is, the population is so foreign – people come from all over the world. And the Germans in the Berlin art world tend to come from southern Germany rather than from Berlin itself. It's very easy to get by.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *How do you account for the Berlin exception?*

BERNARD FRIZE – I think, for the moment, it's still the economic conditions that are allowing artists to survive and work in real freedom. The big spaces, the low rents. That's starting to change, no doubt.

OLIVIER ZAHM – *In the end, you remain true to your origins. You're still close to the working class.*

BERNARD FRIZE – Yes!

OLIVIER ZAHM – *Where artists truly work!*

BERNARD FRIZE – Bingo!

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