



Above: *Karoline*, 2003, acrylic and resin on canvas, 200 x 245 cms (79.5 x 97 inches). Courtesy: Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris  
Opposite: *Disposition*, 2002, acrylic and resin on canvas, 270 x 225 cms (107 x 89.5 inches). Courtesy: Galerie Micheline Szwaiger, Antwerp

# BERNARD FRIZE

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WHAT is so wonderful about Bernard Frize's paintings? He is matter of fact about what it means to make a painting: to have an idea and to execute it, and then to take the measure of how the result differs from the version that you imagined. He has no single style, no desire to assert himself bombastically, nor the idea that his work constitutes a grand social critique. He refuses even to make a show of modesty by making paintings that are ostentatiously small, awkward, or somehow fashionably absent. And yet these works are as beautiful, desirable, and moving as any paintings being made today.

Frize went to art school in the 1960s in the south of France. He received a certain amount of traditional, technical training and an

introduction to the contemporary avant-garde art world. Deeply involved in the events of 1968, Frize stopped making art for several years, finding it incompatible with his politics. When he began painting again in the 1970s, political issues of work and product structured his art (and they continue to do so today). His first 'mature' works were painted with a *trainard*, a single-haired brush used to depict ships' rigging in naval scenes. Using only this somewhat absurd instrument, Frize filled in large abstract canvases with fine lines. The story amuses, as we imagine the painter engaged in this Sisyphean task, but it also spells out in the most direct, materialist way possible what the work of painting is.

Since his re-entry into the field of painting, Frize has worked in a



Quelle, 1998, acrylic and resin on canvas, 190 x 190 cms (75.5 x 75.5 inches). Courtesy: Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica

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number of different ways. *Suite Segond*, 1980, was made by peeling the skins off of open paint cans, and carefully affixing them to a canvas. In the early 1990s, he complicated the basic methods. For a series of paintings, Frize poured several colours of paint into a rectangular box, and pulled off successive skins at intervals; in *Indivisible*, the skins set every 6 weeks or so, and it took over a year to finish the group of thirteen canvases. Each painting therefore took 6 weeks to make, but at the same

time was finished all at once, equally on all parts of the surface – like a developing photograph.

Many of Frize's works rely on the absolute but unpredictable physical properties of paint and physical forces. For *Margarita* (1991), for example, he chose to submit to gravity, painting the surface pink and then suspending the canvas face down, letting drips and swells form in the paint. The pretty strata of *Emir* (1999) were created by tilting an



Chouppa, 2002, acrylic and resin on canvas, 180 x 150 cms (71.5 x 59.5 inches). Courtesy: Galerie Nächst St Stephan, Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, Vienna

emulsion of two non-compatible substances until it separated out into its original components. Other works depend more on Frize's own actions (and those of his assistants). In paintings such as the series titled *Conducteur* (2001) a single winding brushstroke fills the entire canvas, the colours fading as the stroke curls around and around, exhausting the paint. For related pictures, such as *Tipper* (1997), the artist took a giant, handmade brush and wielded it to cover the surface in a single sweep.

Many recent works weave several strokes together, each made by a different hand, into grids that resemble close-ups of textiles, with warp and woof, as in the complicated and lovely *Grand Tricoloure* (1998). Others braid skeins of colour into painted rope. There are also 'fishbone' paintings, such as *Quelle* (1998), in which individual ribs are pulled out of a spine of colours, seeming to grow right out of a kind of central nervous system of the painting. Paradoxically, they also seem to feed back into that same central system.

The least predictable works of the Frize oeuvre are those he creates through layering. Works such as *Coordonné* (2001), *Karolin* (2003), and *Disposition* (2002) are made by choosing a certain number of colours, loading them on brushes, and passing them down a line of 'hands' (Frize and his assistants) that lay down a stroke and then send the brush on

down the line. The logical completion of this passing of brushes results in a grid of strokes, each one layered several times. Because the colours are laid on in different sequences, and because with each stroke the brushes have less pigment, each area of the grid ends up with a different colour and intensity – some are more green, some more purple, some blue, some orange.

Planning out his method in advance of making each painting serves a double purpose. First, it obviates the habits of hand that can stamp a painters' work; like many artists of his generation, Bernard Frize sees the peculiarities of the individual self as no less confining than the academic conventions to which artists once submitted. Second, and equally important, these rules provide systems and limits that also displace any standard discourse of 'modernism' or 'abstract painting'. In this, we might see Frize in the context of contemporary experimental painters such as Sol Lewitt, David Reed, and Raoul de Keyser, whose work is paradoxically cool and strongly original. Even in this company, Frize stands out, in a way that is difficult to pinpoint. Here's the best I can do: his paintings are easy to describe, and yet they wildly exceed that description, in a way that is true of everything I love most.

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