PAUL ROUPHAIL | The Embarrassment

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In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) Ludwig Wittgenstein addresses his theory of the *language game* as not merely a “mirror of the world” but rather as a “form of life”; words, he suggests, do not function as rigid, unambiguous labels, but as mobile constructs whose meaning changes precisely in relation to their function: their meaning is “in use”. After spending the last few years studying Italian, Paul Rouphail became interested in a number of linguistic analogies between Italian, French, and Spanish. In Italian, the verb “imbarazzare” means “to cause embarrassment”, just as the French “embarrasser” does. In Spanish, however, “estar embarazada” means “to be pregnant”. In all three languages, the noun “barra”, meaning “bar, rod, barrier”, derives from Vulgar Latin and came to indicate, through transposition, an impediment. Following this trail of analogies, similarities, and linguistic games, Rouphail turned his attention to El Niño as the name given to an unusual warming phenomenon that, as early as previous centuries, fishermen in Peru and Ecuador observed almost every year towards the end of December, around Christmas. They therefore began calling this warm current El Niño, in honor of the birth of the Christ Child. Over the course of the twentieth century, scientists realized that this warming was not merely a small, local, seasonal anomaly, but part of a vast and periodic global climatic cycle. The thermal anomalies associated with El Niño can be visualized as a dark amaranth band encircling the equatorial waters of the Pacific and releasing its heat across the rest of the world. Once again: impediment, constraint. This polysemy, born from a reflection on linguistic analogies, is transposed by Rouphail onto a broader metaphorical plane that, beginning with the global political and ecological crisis, engages with the very meaning of painting. The new corpus of paintings on view - ten oil works in which the recurrence of certain subjects is the key to a broader analysis of the artist’s imaginative universe - offers a non-didactic, non-descriptive reflection on this correlation. These works resonate with a wide-ranging investigation into the intrinsic qualities of painting as a linguistic device: a magnetic field that, registering the tensions of the world, is capable of translating them into an internal dimension - into drawing and figuration - and of connecting them with space, with its extension within the picture through the brushstroke.

The Embarrassment is one of such works from which the artist constructs the exhibition as a whole. In this a medium-sized canvas there appears a reproduction of a celebrated woodcut by Paul Jacoulet, the French master who became a naturalised Japanese citizen in 1935. The presence of *Tattooed Woman of Falalap, West Carolines (Femme tatouée de Falalap, Ouest Carolines)* introduces a distinctive stylistic marker within Rouphail’s painting: the *mise en abyme*, the picture within the picture. At a second level, it also inscribes another equally central aspect: off-staging, the removal of the human subject from the scene and the assumption of the gaze by inanimate objects and reproduced artworks, as if within a set of Chinese boxes. From this perspective, the thoroughly contemporary *trompe-l’œil* that occupies the artist’s works signals a further departure from representation. If, in the heightened exoticization of the female subject reproduced in the woodcut, the artist - Jacoulet, in this case - lingers on a prurient transposition of Western desire onto stereotypes associated with the hedonistic imaginary of distant lands, it is equally true that Rouphail, as a counterpoint, paints another indexical trace in the lower right-hand corner: a globe, of the kind one might find in any domestic interior, marked by the amaranth band of El Niño which, spreading across the equatorial Pacific, encircles and constrains the ocean, as described at the beginning of this text, heating its waters in this miniature representation of the world. Rouphail’s painting moves through a range of references, echoing, on the one hand, seventeenth-century Flemish painting - certainly in the particular quality it accords to light, a warm light that washes over the *boiserie* of dusty old interiors or silently floods the artist’s studio - and, on the other, American Precisionism. The latter, which emerged in the United States around 1915 and flourished during the interwar period as a celebration of the industrialization and modernization of the American landscape, is deliberately rethought and recalibrated in relation to the heroic epic that characterized its historical origins. In this respect, rather than celebrating landscape and the postmodern mythology of America, Rouphail is interested in revealing points of fragility, fissures, and fragmentation - as in his close-up views, or his elevated, bird’s-eye perspectives over the

outskirts of the city, where *oneworld, American Airlines* aircraft dominate the skies while below, in the absence of human figures, life unfolds among twisted utility poles and windows with rotten panes.
In the outlining of these infinitesimal details, on which the painting lingers with absolute assurance, Rouphail encourages extended periods of looking - a long exposure, one might say, borrowing the term from the vocabulary of photography. This first point of contact with the viewer's gaze is decisive: allowing images to settle, to clarify, to precipitate. If the still life is a dominant aesthetic throughout much of his work, it is also true that Rouphail perhaps derives his compositional framing more from cinema than from painting. Here, framing enters the picture, endowed by the artist with a specific semantic value. Many of the works in the exhibition are in fact structured around a visual threshold, a barrier between the field of reality and the pictorial field, to borrow Daniel Arasse's formulation. This threshold - a windowsill, a desk - functions as a precise device of vision. It marks not so much a passage into elsewhere as the channelling of the gaze into a hypnotic counter-space, revealed as an extension of reality. The latter appears all the more altered precisely insofar as it is ordinary, object-based, concrete. Within this metaphysics of objects, the signifying function is performed simultaneously by light and framing. In the interior paintings, the atmospheric consistency of space is created through light and color, by means of a skillful distribution of brushstrokes in gradients and a meticulous study of the incidence of light and shadow across the pictorial surface. This luminous vitality also radiates across the fields of grain and dusty roads of the American landscapes: in *January Landscape* and *Afternoon in August*, for example, the glints produced by the sun evoke a crystalline atmosphere while simultaneously marking the passage of time that structures the experience of looking, lending it a perceptible duration. For Rouphail, the meaning of representation is something semantically open, integrated into the very act of painting and looking. This does not entail sacrificing thematic density, but rather granting painting a purely linguistic function of its own. What remains, if not the persistence of the image - a retinal persistence, passing from the eye to the brain and allowing the image itself to become fixed as it settles into our memory? This persistence is what imbues the object - the hammer on the table in the artist's studio, a small bull statuette, a cloud painted as though it were a carnival mask, a vase of fresh lilies, a row of terraced houses - with an almost sacred consistency, absorbed as it is by a warm light that is at once natural and artificial.
In *Indignation,* light filters through the panes of a window positioned to the right of the picture, an invisible window perceived only through its projection as a shadow onto the wall behind, from which hangs a painting - a detail from the oil painting *The Two Rivers* (1943) by the Russian-born painter and sculptor Peter Blume. A bronze bull, head lowered, charges towards this invisible window, its hooves pressing down on a book whose title we recognize from the lettering on its spine. Here another fundamental coordinate of Rouphail's work comes into play: literature. *Indignation* is the title of a short novel in which the American writer Philip Roth recounts the education of a young man confronted with the opportunities and impediments of life in 1951 America. It is a story of inexperience, foolishness, rage, and error. In Rouphail's painting, this story is inhabited by a more subdued and weary version of Wall Street's *Charging Bull.* These silent artifacts inhabit domestic interiors, inviting observation through their object-hood, brought into being through the pragmatics of the act of painting itself. What is exceptional lies in finding *the right moment*, arresting it so that it can become an activator of the dynamics of space, time, and memory.
Within the continuity that objects establish inside the canvas - that is, within the linguistic game and syntactical associations Rouphail constructs through them - a discrepancy opens up. In *You All Know*, for instance, a vase of lush purple lilies appears in the foreground on a windowsill overlooking an industrial landscape. Stamped onto a tall smokestack, the block lettering "U-All-No" recalls the slogan of the Manufacturing Company of America, once the producer of "U-All-No After Dinner Mints." In the upper right, a oneworld aircraft - one of the main commercial networks of independent carriers operating an integrated flight network - crosses the sky, framed by the old buildings. It is precisely in the overlapping of these sensory tangents - the scent of fresh lilies, the memory of a now-decadent past, and that of a present shaped by global economic alliances - that the spark between analogy and dissonance occurs. The scene's structural rigor does not lead to a reconciling synthesis; rather, it harbors an uncanny aura. Paul Rouphail's painting moves within a state of perpetual, subtle restlessness, suspended between the familiar and the alienating, the *quasi-sacred* and the threatening. Configured around contradictory pairs, it activates a privileged contact between observation and interpretation, thereby reaffirming - much like in language - the impossibility of grasping lucid meanings fixed once and for all.