

Fabrice Stroun: Can you tell me what these works are? Are they paintings?

Mai-Thu Perret: Yes. They're not canvases, but they're paintings. They're abstract paintings, painted with acrylic gouache, and sometimes with gouache, on plywood boards. The boards are standard, store bought panels built in such a way that they can be hung flush against the wall without any frame or visible nails or screws.

FS: Well, actually what I am asking you is to describe the distance with which we should look at them. I know you are very interested in the paintings of Sherrie Levine for example, and her works were first described as "paintings of paintings", surrogates of what "real" paintings might be. Of course this discourse, which initially accompanied the reception of her paintings, has receded from our critical horizon. Nevertheless, there is an ongoing tradition of abstract painters that relate to their works as "stand-ins" of sorts, and since we've often talked about how many of your other works tend to function as props within larger narratives, I was wondering whether the same could be said of these paintings.

MTP: You are asking me two different questions. You ask me what are they, and I say, they're paintings. Now, what do the paintings do, that's another question. In a way it's a question of perspective, because why isn't the thing itself a surrogate? It's a mental construct, this idea that you are dealing with the thing itself and not a replacement of something else. Of course some painters want to foreground their relationship to other paintings, the historicity of what they are doing, while on the contrary others want to ignore this history and make you feel that you are standing in front of a painting as such, cut off from all other determinants. But a painting "as such", of course that's just a lovely fiction.

FS: Can you tell us a bit about your decision to show these works, which are fairly recent, with a survey of your text works, which are older and in a way much more familiar?

MTP: There's a formal simplicity to the juxtaposition which I find attractive. You know, text vs. image, glass vs. matte, this sort of thing. I don't make too many two-dimensional works that hang on the wall, so maybe it's just about flat stuff. It goes back to the question of language. The paintings always feel like symbols, signifiers for which you have lost the signified, or for which the signified doesn't exist but which somehow drag you to search for it. As for the texts, they are fragments of stories, dispatches from a half-imagined world. I felt that it was logical to juxtapose these two different ways of dealing with meaning.

FS: Let's talk about the iconographic material that you are recomposing. I know your sources are quite varied, all the way from Indian religious painting to Constructivist works from the 1910s.

MTP: There are so many different sources. In a way I am more interested in the succession of the images, in the way that one image comes after another, than in the image itself, although of course when I am making a particular painting I concentrate on it alone. The imagery, the formal language I borrow from is really all over the place. It's almost anything that I can use to make an abstraction, although of course there are specific sources or worlds that I regularly return to. You mention Tantric painting and Constructivism. It's about extremely reduced languages, the barest bones of a language or a signification, an elemental language of abstraction. I've always been interested in the way that all seemingly elemental languages are actually historical and have layers. Tantric painting to me is especially fascinating. On one level I just happen to like these kinds of shapes, probably because I have been exposed to them a lot, it's fairly Pavlovian. But at the same time they complicate my reading of a more canonical tradition in abstract painting. A tantric painting really messes up your understanding of...

FS: ...Kandinsky...

MTP: ...not even Kandinsky, because at least he was a mystic, but for example take Wladislaw Strzeminsky, whose paintings also have this elemental quality, or those of Rodchenko or El Lissitzky. You have this work which purports to be purely rational, or in the case of Strzeminsky, to be directly derived from a mathematical formula, and in fact other people have come to very similar formal conclusions from a completely different starting point. Of course if you pause to think about it a little longer mathematics are used in most mystical systems, but that's another discussion.

FS: One thing that I find quite striking with these paintings in comparison with the rest of your output, is their quiet, meditative quality. The discursive facet of these works seems far less pronounced than in, for example, your sculptures. I may of course be blinded by my own preconceived relationship to small, abstract paintings...

MTP: No, of course, it's something inherent to this type of practice. I think they are icons. It's going to sound completely new-age, which I'm not, but when I started making paintings, long before I started making text pieces and sculptures, I was very into Agnes Martin.

FS: It's true, back in 1997, you started out as a painter.

MTP: I've always fantasized about a perfect union between the head and the hand in the act of making. Later I figured out that I was too impatient to be another Agnes Martin. But I think it's still there, this very profound desire for a meditative relationship to work. FS: Here is a more contextual question: you are surrounded by abstract painters, artists your age, whom you are friends with, such as Philippe Decrauzat or Stéphane Dafflon, or a slightly older figure like John Tremblay, whom you even worked for. All of them maintain, in one way or another, a strong link to Pop Art, whether in their interest for popular culture or, most importantly, in their relationship to commodity culture and graphic design. Your paintings seem to occupy a whole other sphere, one that is infinitely more rarefied, almost muted.

MTP: My paintings are not Pop, but at the same time I don't think they're touchy feely.

FS: No, they don't advertize your sensitivity, that's for sure.

MTP: That's right. I try to have a healthy disregard for the cleverness of the solutions that I can bring to making a painting, to avoid too much effect in the way I paint. For example there is always a little bit of brushwork, but it's accidental, it's because sometimes I can't be really bothered to do it well enough. Most of the times I really go for a flat surface, I don't try to invent texture effects or this kind of thing. I like this flatness. I like that it looks like somebody has patiently tried to copy something. There is a kind of desire to remain at a degree zero, and at the same time it's not an industrial or mechanical degree zero. If you use masking tape for example, the way many artists you mention work, you get these very sharp edges, these clear cut surfaces. My paintings are made out of gouache, it's more of a drawing medium than a high painting medium. It's a poster medium actually. I guess it's about trying to find a neutral point, there is an element of being sensitive in them, but I wouldn't say that's what they're about at all.

FS: Can you tell me what prompted you to start painting again? If I remember correctly, you first started making them in 2005 in New York in a temporary studio John Armleder was using to make works for an upcoming American show.

MTP: Well, of all my works these are the most about passing time. Somehow it's a very different than when I am working on more conceptual projects, such as an installation or a film for example. These paintings are so light, doing them is more like drawing or writing. It's a very domestic practice. I first began because I had time to spend while John was working on his own paintings, and I had nothing to do. So I thought well, if he is painting why don't I just do the same, it really was a way to keep myself busy, I could have been reading a book. I ended up making four of them

in one afternoon and I thought wow, these things work. I was very surprised because I had given up on painting completely. It was a thing that I loved but that I felt I wasn't able to do, so I was quite happy.

FS: Did you feel like you were returning to something?

MTP: No, I feel like I found a way to do something that I couldn't have done without all the work that came in between. And all the people that I met in between. These paintings are clearly related to John in the sense that he helped me figure out a number of things about painting that I didn't know I knew, or that I learned with him, by looking at him or talking with him or seeing how he was dealing with his work. We're probably not going to print this, but of course you copy the things you love. Children and artists do it all the time.

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