

Neither for lovers nor for curators...

Do you know the story of Écoline, the little dog who, because she doesn't want to look after sheep, decides to go up to the capital to become a painter and make a living from her art? In the streets of bohemian Paris, as the Universal Exhibition gets underway, Écoline faces many obstacles to realizing her dream... 1

As I was telling him, at an opening, the synopsis of this children's book I'd just bought for a little girl, Hugo Ansel proclaimed that he was Écoline, the little bitch who goes to Paris to become a painter. "It's the story of my life," he said dryly, adding that we were finally holding the pitch for the press release I was to write for this exhibition... I remember we had a good laugh at his rotten joke, but I'd never have dared take him literally at that moment. But after all, why not? After all, what do I know about Hugo Ansel? Not much, except that he's one of those taciturn types who uses humor and irony to dodge overly personal intrusions. I also know, among a few other things, that Hugo studied at the art school of Cergy, that he's a painter, that in 2013 he began a series - still in progress - of ballpoint pen drawings on notepad graph paper, that he refused to allow these drawings to be published, that he has a sister, that he grew up in the suburbs, that he exhibited paintings in 2021 at Bagnoler, that he has just started to study at EHESS, that he is researching Emily Dickinson, that he is frequently seen in parties with a plastic bag full of beers in his hand... Let's face it, whether it's about Hugo's personal life or his artistic practice, it's very complicated to squeeze anything out of Hugo. In any case, few people know how. It's obvious, we can't rely on personal anecdotes to shed light on his practice. Poor Sainte-Beuve, you would have torn your hair out. Hugo resists biographism and masks his intentions with games of semiotic transparency, using rhetorical devices to distance himself in his works and in his life: humor, the obvious, commonplaces, stereotypes, silence... If we had to qualify Hugo's strategic position, let's say he's one of those people who prefers disidentification to an overly situated attitude (yes, you've recognized, that's a reference to Muñoz). So why not use the banality of the mythology of the artist who moves to Paris (we're back to Écoline) to fill in the gaps: it's fun! Besides, it's reminiscent of what's going on in his drawings. Weird, slightly empty, quickly scribbled drawings, grotesque but without precise intention - sometimes reminiscent of the *Calligraphies d'humeur* that Jean-Michel Sanejouand executed in Indian ink between 1968 and 1978 (this series earned him anathema from the minimalist and conceptual doxa of the time).

It's true that it took me a long time to squeeze any info out of Hugo, and quite often I needed a few adjuvants, alcohol and a few acquaintances to help. I don't remember exactly when we started hanging out, but I felt a sort of pride in having cracked the Hugo Ansel mystery, because he still prefers to keep quiet and listen, even observe, rather than talk nonsense - which, in this day and age, is a great relief. We often meet up after a usual«tfq» 2 (even skipping the question mark, we understand each other). Here we are an hour later, strolling along the most exclusive terraces or vernissages in Paris, after Hugo has passed by grocery store to buy 8 single cigarettes, because never will he ever buy a full new pack (another of his quirks, who knows). I steal some of them cheerfully, and off we go for the night. I often talk on alone a bit, and make Hugo laugh, telling him my most intimate stories, without even looking for validation, but hoping that he'll soon slip me a snippet of his. But in the end, nothing comes up, with him you have to conform to a rather disarming minimalism, like his collection of similar but different jeans. I remember this one time,

a foreign artist wanted to meet a friend and me. I invited Hugo, thinking it would be a good match. But there he was, nose down in his beer, muttering bits of sentences while giving me an inquisitive look. The artist showed Hugo his website with his latest paintings, and Hugo just nodded. I was in tears, though embarrassed for the poor artist wishing to bond with a fellow human being. The question was returned: what was Hugo Ansel's work? He gave me an almost panicked look, turning back to me to support him in this too intrusive question, as if to get him out of a tight spot. I said, "Come on, Hugo, it's your turn to shine", whereupon he answered the fateful question "What are you doing? »: « Paintings ». That was all, and maybe that's all when you want to talk about your work, it's paintings and not an extra scrap of saliva will be wasted past that. I'd say to him, but then if you don't want to talk about them show them! And he replied that his Instagram was neither good for lovers nor for curators. What's the point, then, of this Instagram if it's neither good for flirting nor good for new projects. Maybe it's just good for drunk friends to leave likes and comments at the end of the night, as we did with a freewheeling Matthieu. The likes were pouring in, and the last brilliant photo of bucket-hatted Hugo, idgaf to the max, had us declaiming all our love.

Daphné Praud-Bodéré & Gallien Déjean

1 *Écoline*, par Stephen Desberg et Teresa Martinez. Bamboo, coll. Grand Angle

2 equivalent of « wyd » acronym, in french