

THE FLOW OF WORDS, SOUNDS AND COLORS

Brigitte Ollier

INVISIBLE BREATH. “Now and again, I get the sense I’ve been drawing forever. At first it was a game, but some kids then pursue it, with drawing accompanying them throughout their lives. It’s as natural as breathing. I’ve always been fascinated by the power of drawing, how you can depict everything with next to nothing – a pencil and a scrap of paper. I love such economy of means. In a way it’s liberating, for there is no technical implementation as is the case with painting. The spontaneity prompts an intimate and direct relationship to the work. For the most part, I’ve made painted drawings. Which is why, for me, the border between drawing and painting is so tenuous.”

VISUAL GEARWHEEL. “I never draw from life, but rather start out with an idea, a word, an impression. This entails a temporal process, where the previous drawing determines the subsequent drawing. It’s like links in a chain, a visual gearwheel made up of rudimentary shapes that I superimpose, invert, double or split, - that I keep fiddling with. I set myself rules. I search for the right stroke, its accurate thickness, its tautness or to the contrary, its imperfection. I begin by drawing with a pencil on tracing paper. Tracing paper systematically provides me with a springboard, like a pattern in dressmaking or a protoform in manufacturing. I do not view the drawing as a step, but rather as artwork that should have its autonomy and a place of its own right within the work process. The rough draft, or sketch, is a memory jogger; I don’t show it, it remains between me and myself. I don’t have the dazzling flair of those who scribble in public on paper tablecloths, that’s not my approach.”

PUTTY-COLOR OR ACID GREEN. “What is the role of color in my work? There are no rules, and often the color is pivotal. It’s a dialogue that is at once subjective and intuitive, while also being very codified. Sometimes the color ends up triggering a painting. I sometimes have a desire for color alone and nothing else. Black and white included, of course. For a long time I had – and this even happens nowadays – a particular affection for greyish and unloved colors, like goose-shit green or greyish green. These days I’m using lots of bubblegum pink, as well as gold, without trying to come up with an explanation. I have an ongoing affinity for several colors. My palette keeps shifting over time. New partners crop up, like cheap pink, combined with constants/consistencies such as that shade of blue wedged between cyan and cerulean, or else putty-color or acid green.”

VIBRATORY IMAGE. “For That’s right don’t stop, which is quite emblematic of my recent series of large gouaches on paper, I worked by adding on layers of colored

juice, in superimposition, because I wanted to forge a vibratory image, an acoustic nuance, an echo. The words literally transform, I repeat them, warp them, distort them. I'm interested in how they become color panels. At this stage in the work process, I'm drawn to the interactions and correlations between each of the colors, and the relationships that crop up at their intersections. I'm seeking for a circulation, a formal and retinal starkness.

This series also has a kinship with color-field painting by artists such as Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and an entire generation of Abstract American artists. Artists like Barnett Newman or Ellsworth Kelly who emphasized color to such an extent as to turn it into the true subject of the painting. To rephrase Frank Stella: 'I want the color to be as good on the canvas as it was in the can'."

PRECONCEPTIONS. "My way of painting is not, strictly speaking, abstract but rather non-figurative. It is fueled by multiple sources and references, by hybridization, and by sampling of both daily life and art history. This all feeds into positioning and constructing the artwork.

In painting, as in life, I have a hard time with classifications. I prefer to obfuscate things. I work more by subtraction than by addition. In other words, I know where I don't want to go, that's for sure: I'm more interested in preconceptions."

ABSTRACT NEUTRALITY. "Kurt Schwitters, Magritte, Cy Twombly, Alighiero Boetti, Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, John Giorno, Basquiat, Walter Swennen, Glenn Ligon and a whole lot of others... words have been mingling with painting right from the start. This does not imply that my work can be reduced to words, but words are one of the elements I use as an artistic subject, for their meaning or non-meaning, as well as for their tone and shape.

I prefer to avoid using my own handwriting; that would involve a kind of figuration or self-portrait, when what I'm after is abstract neutrality. For this reason, I select typographies that are as inconspicuous as possible, and that do not create a diversion. My concerns, for all intents and purposes, deal with painting, and not with writing. For me, words are paint."

I'M THE JUICE. "Words also resonate with the music that has been part of my daily life ever since I was a teenager. Music is a magnetic force. I think that all the arts are interlinked, and that there is a common denominator to the spirit and concerns of each art-form. As a natural and logical consequence, words and musical sounds are embedded in my work.

I love correlations among words, their magnetism, their reverberation and their sound. For instance in I'm the juice, I used a clip from a song by Oran 'Juice' Jones, a black Soul/Rap singer with the New York label Def Jam in the late 80s. I chose it for its exhilarating bravado."

PROJECTION SCREEN. "The atelier is my territory. I'm here day after day. It's where everything happens. I've got to be making, which is why, in a sense, you could call my practice classical. I don't work like a company manager, as certain artists do. Occasionally I will collaborate with artisans on specific projects, most often for sculptures. I find this enriching; I respect their knowhow and experience.

In general, people have a romantic and stereotypical vision of the painter's atelier, as if splattered with paint, in shambles from top to bottom, sort of à la Bacon. My atelier happens to be pretty clean, partially because my lacquer technique requires a dust-free space. An atelier reflects the nature of what gets done there, and mine is in line with my artwork. I need to set to blank/to whitewash, to visually isolate the works that are there, to totally clear things up in order to focus better. The atelier is a huge projection screen.

Marc Rebollo interviewed by Brigitte Ollier