

MARC RENARD — 1999

Peins ton vertige

Guy Gilsoul (AICA), Fondation Veranneman, Kruishoutem — February 1999

Peins ton vertige

Warning

Let the tree grow, so be it. But when it invades, from within, the very body of the painter, the tree becomes monstrous. Murderous. When the inexorable advance of its roots makes the stones and the warm humus capsize, they are indeed tongues, sexes, smooth and blind limbs that carry the painter into the viscera of subterranean life, there, in the cellar of the house where he believed himself safe. And from cracks to vertigoes, the roots suck up the mud and the gravel, threatening the studio, which is already wavering. Yet the painter takes pleasure because a red has caressed his heart while brushing against yellow. Because at last he holds it, this garden of fresh paint, even though the countdown has already begun. For the tree continues to advance, again and again. In the white void, the branches, weighed down by their flight, sweep the air between the leaves and strike the light in regular imprints of green or violet, orange or earthy hues, which fall and fall ever more beautifully, while the trunk, finally, rises, terrifying, black and implacable. Nothing will prevent it from being and from roaring. Black of absences, of nothings less than nothing, absolute nothingness, black of lines that are too straight, recalling the dull horizon of boxes of sedatives lined up upstairs, in walls of prayers. The painter is in pain. Planted right in the belly like a needle in a cyclops' ear, the monster-tree slowly grows. Accompanied by a piercing and dreadfully continuous sound, accumulating around itself all the fragments of the world, it pierces the softness of the brain. Then, like the cypress glimpsed one hundred and ten years ago from the room in Saint-Rémy de Provence, the tree catches fire and burns, confusing the stars and the painter who, in his cellar, alone, feels the door creaking in his mind.

If the space of the rectangle did not remain to him, that troubling place where the breath of thought and body united is constructed, the painter would be afraid. He is afraid. But time has passed and the vertigo, which is nothing without the appetite it opens up, attracts him more than anything. The void that painting tirelessly fills, unbeknownst even to the painter, with the tree, its roots, its branches and its leaves.

And there is the work, with the taste of warm blood, at the antipodes of nothingness, itself rooted in terror and ecstasy, clinging to its master, of whom one does not know whether he is the painter or art. The wild work of a fight to the death in which the painter would confront man and the latter the painter, then all the painters of the earth. Rooted and, in truth, joyful.

Yet it must be shown....

Yet it must be shown....

In an age such as ours, when there is no longer any question of evoking death except the death of art, of ideologies or of others, it is considered fashionable to deny art (and painting in particular) any genealogical depth. And the celebration of surfaces, of flattening things out, of screens beneath which, decidedly, there is nothing except the signifier disguised as quotations, might perhaps be only one of its consequences. With Marc Renard, to take this path would be to miss the appointment. If his work touches us so deeply, it is precisely because it reconnects with the history of Western painting, of which it is the heir, and with the intuition that guided its steps. At this point, however, we must retain the warning issued by Gerhard Richter: "my painting is more intelligent than I am." It is therefore the painting itself (and not the painter, blinded, dazzled, immersed) that, day after day, makes painting in the process of being made. It, bound to the "I paint" or to the "it" that paints. Despite, because, thus. Yet this binding does not reveal itself easily. At best, starting from the works themselves, one may attempt to discern its thread, or at least show to what extent this work, so contemporary, already fully participates in the great History of Art. Indeed, if in recent years one has been able to speak of transcending the boundaries between painting, video, photography, or indeed text, sound or places (and Marc Renard himself does not hesitate, but always at the stage of the pre-text, to explore various neighbouring territories), what of painting alone? What of painting too quickly judged on the basis of its illustrative function for an intention or a concept, or even of the feeling of "strength" it conveys to the one who takes it hostage of his own dreams of power? Have we forgotten that painting too lives through cross-border relationships between various semiotic constituents that assemble and overlap, not according to a principle of lateral additions but, precisely, in the depth of meaning. On the flat screen of painting, it is not a surface that is laid down but a fragment of entire space, admittedly bounded by a quartet of right angles.

When, like Marc Renard, one has looked attentively at the works in museums and then, with the same respect, at those of Van Gogh, Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning, one knows that no weakness is admissible. At the same time, one learns that painting itself cares little about good intentions. Or even about the psyche. There is the paradox. There is painting.

Let us come closer.

The beginnings

The first tubes of oil paint Marc Renard received bore the mark of wear. It was a gift, an inheritance, a transmission. Not a purchase. And when, barely thirteen years old, he made his first copies of Van Gogh landscapes, he felt the smell of the Dutch master's colours penetrate his nostrils all the way to his heart.

Without realizing it, Marc Renard had just entered painting.

In the former playroom converted into a studio, he astonished those around him. His father less so, an airplane pilot whose returns the young adolescent feared, than his mother, attentive, protective and a musician in her spare time.

He then asked for a guide. A man who knew how to bring him into being. In Namur, the painter Marcel Warrand opened his eyes: "look, see, everything is in nature." Another IATA teacher, Michel Cambier, challenged him with exercises in which, through precise and patient drawings and models, the young student learned to distribute space and move from surface to volume in miniaturized theatres filled with luminous illusionism and distorted perspectives. It was this same teacher who, under the pretext of a study on the theme of slaughterhouses, revealed the work of Francis Bacon to him. He was now ready to enter the world of the great.

The Brussels Academy of Fine Arts still impresses those who, passing through the small street door, discover a cosmopolitan anthill laden with dreams coming from China and Russia, Africa, Turkey and sometimes from very close by. Among the groups, the gazes, the words, there remain the silences of the cloister and its garden, that of the library and above all the smell of the great studios. Like so many others, perhaps more than most, Marc Renard thirsts to be, to work, to confront the nude and the large formats that force him to step back. Thirst to join the lineage. So he seeks his brothers: Ribera or Chia, De Kooning, Balthus, Bacon or Rubens, and draws, draws again, paints, paints again, doubting more than ever and yet certain that he is on the right path. The analysis of a painting made in 1987 (illustration), while he was completing a second cycle of studies in the "Monumental Painting" section, could serve as our guide. It indeed brings together everything that would be there later, at the same time as everything that, in order for this to happen, would have to disappear or metamorphose. Everything, therefore, including, since at that time he associated the figurative with its opposite, the iconographic dimension. It is a "composition" in the academic sense of the term. That is, a setting (here a landscape) in front of which figures and "accessories" move in muted tones. Two figures are in dialogue. The first, seen from behind and occupying the central axis, directly refers to Ingres's *La Baigneuse de Valpinçon*. The second, slightly closer to the picture plane, on the right and facing us, is nothing more than a crude silhouette outlined in black. It has the halo of a saint and the grimacing appearance of a devil. Its wings are meagre, its skull split as a tree can be split by axe blows. Between the two figures, a black arc (one thinks of Kandinsky, who made it the very sign of fear) forms a bridge linking them.

Ingres, white and black

The horizon is high, blocked by the upper parts of the bodies and, at the extreme left, by a red form that could suggest the body of a jellyfish. Let us return to Ingres. What role is assigned to this quotation? What does it conceal of a figure that cannot show itself? What does it reveal? The fascination he would later admit for fabrics is already there, but it is not enough. Ingres, thus injected into a painting destined for expressionist developments, might even appear to be an error. Unless, on the one hand, we grant the French draughtsman a passion for the chromatic challenges of

white, which will play an essential role in Marc Renard's work. Unless Ingres signals, through his very classicism, the profound Latinity in which Marc Renard does not yet recognize himself. Unless, finally, Ingres precisely loves that aesthetic of closure which Marc rejects. Ingres then becomes the very symbol of what the young painter rejects, the truth of the object, and at the same time of what attracts him: the heroic mastery of the classical. But there is something else which, this time extending beyond the frame of the figure, returns to the force of whiteness. And, by opposition, to that of black, its alter ego: "The violence of extremes inhabits me," Marc Renard would write to me more than ten years later. "That is probably why I am so attracted by the fact of executing such different works; I move from a 'Garden' to neuropsychiatry without any difficulty. Paradox?"

When, in 1994, all direct allusion to the figure had disappeared (which does not mean that it was absent), white retained the same central and monumental bearing. White is indeed someone. Like black, with which it associates itself, painter, devil and angel at once, masked entertainer, pursued juggler, attacked and violent. The trace of the gesture itself will henceforth take over from the figures. It is what will push painting out of its hinges and, still within the framework of a powerful tonalism, enter the fray. From then on, among all the marks and signs, one can distinguish only furrows carved into living materials, inscribed vases, threatening tubes and other ellipses of a reality in which the struggle between the White Bather and his "little boy" devil continues.

Painting, over the course of the canvases, takes command. It is in its name that Marc brushes, crushes, stamps and finally finds, in the imprint obtained by crushing fragments of old foam mattresses soaked in colours, the interlocutor that his arm and his whole body, more than his hand, were demanding. He is then ready, while a continuous pounding resonating in his head forces him to break the silence of the studio by flooding it with even more violent music. Would that be the price to pay? Hard gesture, precise strike immediately accompanied by glides, stretches, complaints and caresses. Between the black knots that point towards the white centre and strangle it, between the breaks in scale raised to the level of evidence and the falling movements, space tightens (illustration). It closes in while expressing its constraining authority. In reality, it even strengthens itself, in the manner in which Giotto did it, through a visual doubling (a form, a gesture, an oblong trace) of the lateral edges at a precise distance corresponding to the measurement transferred from the height. This is called a folding back into the square.

1994–1995

Marc Renard knows nothing of its geometric construction, or even of its use, but he saw it in the frescoes of the Arena Chapel in Padua and those of Assisi. By intuition, he rediscovered its profound meaning: that of the struggle between dramatic oppression and the heroic combat that accompanies it. For, let us not be mistaken, in those years 1994–1995, at the very moment when Marc Renard discovers love and, at the same time, the infernal obsessive spiral that corrodes his mind, his painting joins the great genealogy and memory of the practice of Latin art.

His compositions will henceforth take on a new complexity, the result of an acuity sharpened by self-violence itself. Thus, for example, against this returning centripetal force, persistent and against which he employs various strategies. Thus, the mask that he moves across his sketches and which often reveals solutions to him that his mind alone would not have been able to accept. Or again, on countless sketches and preparatory sheets, the use of computer manipulations, enlargements, reversals, as well as an insatiable thirst to poke around and photograph the world in its most opposed gardens and fragments. The use of a more oblong canvas format allows him, in a work of 1995 (illustration), to reverse the perspective and reach, from the very centre, but with a now centrifugal tension, the edges of the work, still caught in the vice of the same folding-back system. The "Pietà" by Petrus Christus in the Brussels museum was its starting point. A work by a Flemish Primitive this time, which is nevertheless said to be composed according to rigorous symmetry, but in which, above all, one can measure how much the humanism of the Northern Gothics, instead of a conquest of the world (and the centralization of vanishing points that hollows out perspectival space), arises from an encounter. Between, on the one hand, light (that of Abbot Suger's precious stone) and, on the other, man who, through his art (of carving, for example), makes the infinite and the finite coincide. In short, the paradoxical.

Now, in this 1995 canvas, one could recognize in the gestural signs confronting one another two dancers facing each other, against a white square placed high. The first is black. The second, green. Thus, to the tonalist of yesterday, and despite a general harmony based on variations of grey, hue suddenly emerges and, to make it scream more loudly, a trembling in orange streaks.

In the canvases that follow, white once again dominates, drawing the movement towards itself, which, between backstage spaces, propels the gaze. The confusion between background and figures gives way to a more complex, more subtly perverse organization. Sometimes a single sign-knot threatens, horizontal at the same time as it indicates the possible escape routes which, from now on, are no longer concerned with doubling the edges. Other canvases summon, contradictorily, waterfalls and underwater currents, the undertow and storm waves, the impression of expansion and that of bursts.

1996 — Peins ton vertige

Sometimes the abyss reappears, whitish, sucking, monstrously maternal. Facing it, forms as haunting as they are powerful, almost slimy, visceral, instil terror. One slips, one plunges, one disappears: "My painting, I'm dying from it," the painter shouted one day during one of our telephone conversations.

"Peins ton vertige", 1996.

One day, Marc Renard's doctor advised him to paint his vertigo. He set to work. But is it really him? Painting has no use for advice. Vertigo became a space of beating wings, aborted encounters, wrenchings and signs accumulated around a central axis broken within itself. Blown apart. But precisely, through this scattering of chromatic and

informal elements, a haunting swaying movement was born, supported by renewed work on textures. Smooth or granular, thick or ghostly, light or heavy, the surfaces of the backgrounds like "figurae" created a harmony, even a joy. Painting rejected the theme at the same time as the painter's sole ego. It took the place of the master and of fear. It affirmed life. No wonder, then, that in the following, more colourful canvases, the background, as the work inspired by the Pietà had already suggested, became a pulsating force, projecting the signs into the foreground. The impression of an underwater universe was succeeded by the reign of the aerial, where everything would be nothing but flight and taking flight. The textures, as we said, in turn bring about a desire for simplification, expressed first by limiting the number of signs but also, and more fundamentally, by structuring the various elements according to a rhythm of responses and openings. We were even approaching a first pacification but, in the suddenly darkened sky, beaks mingled with outstretched wings, eye sockets and confused depths. Red, black, yellow, white. Death entered life. And life wounded death. The painter struck hard, went over, crushed, stippled, underlined, while painting, each day a little more vegetal, swooned.

1998, crossed out in black.

Its neck had to be twisted. Or it had to be called to order. In place of an axis of symmetry, but as authoritarian as it could be, a long black rectangle separates, in a 1998 canvas, two unequal surfaces, each inhabited by two monumental suspended imprints. Heavy. Too heavy. The diaphanous, lunar night sky is opposed, below, by a broad horizontal rectangle, matte red. It has the perfection of the geometries found on medicine boxes. Like black, it indicates the implacable at the same time as hope. The canvas presents itself as a Da-sein, a structure there, immediate, threatening.

1998 and after

The imprints, vertical clouds, repeat themselves like the first cuneiform writings. Between past and present, science and chance, noise and silence, Marc Renard chooses only painting. The kind that stands up and asserts itself, resists the attentive gaze as much as the casual glance, follows the visitor, harasses him until the moment when he gives himself over to it. Never, perhaps, has a canvas been so frontal, so violent in its asceticism. Was it, once again, painting or the painter who was responsible? Which of them, the Bather or the angel-devil, was right about the other?

It was then that the first gardens, which had appeared shortly before, were succeeded by new landscapes and, with them, a need for fresh air, tenderness, flowers and colours. Of this enclosed garden where, coming from the sky, the bird seeks to alight. Of this Venetian room where, in the warm softness of summer, the beautiful Venus of Urbino abandons her body and warmth to the sheets. In an "untitled" painting (like all the others), one finds the same red as in the preceding work, but there the comparison ends. The structure is almost identical to that proposed by Titian in the masterpiece that inspired Goya, Courbet, Manet and... Ingres. That is, based on an accord between asymmetries, a harmonious movement that extends and gathers itself, going back and forth endlessly at the very heart of a broad breathing that frees space from its

enclosure. Thus Latinity encountered the ancient Gothic manner in a new synchrony that resolved at the same time the monumentality of the visual impact and the slowness of the visual journey. Nothing less was needed to intrigue me and to verify what my eye instinctively recognized. The new character of the hues, which, from the luminous contrasts of the red-green complements, the black-white contrasts and the exaltations of orange-yellow, would in the following months acquire fruity flavours, was indeed in the direction of the colourists. Whether Venetian or Flemish. But if, indeed, painting in what it has of signifying totality now governed the destiny of the work, it had to agree on other points. Such as, for example, structure. Yet this structure, increasingly rich, holds many surprises for the one who takes the trouble to search for its thread. And this structure, quite apart from the painter's own intention, responds exactly to a harmonic based on the golden ratio where, starting from a work on backstage planes, the imprints inscribed on either side of an upright sign take their place according to a scansion that defines each time, through a back-and-forth movement, equivalent relationships between the parts and the whole. Something peaceful was born from this balance of tensions, while day by day the variety was becoming more precise, no longer only of surfaces or gestures but above all of the hues themselves and of their increasingly deep, delicate, audacious harmonies. There is even, in the latest works, a hint of Bonnard, of a glimpse of nirvana, of a desire to give. Or perhaps, more precisely, of an exact coexistence between life and that dream of power

Conclusion

described by Nietzsche: "The greatness of an artist," wrote the philosopher of Weimar, "is not measured by the beautiful feelings he arouses but resides in the grand style, that is, in his capacity to master inner chaos, to force his own chaos to take form; to act in a logical, simple, categorical, mathematical manner, to make oneself a law — that is the great ambition."

Having reached this new threshold, Marc Renard and his painting are no more than one and the same truth that Ingres and Bacon, Van Gogh and Titian would recognize. Yes, Marc Renard truly belongs to the lineage.

Guy Gilsoul (Aica). February 1999.

Translation note

Faithful English translation of the supplied French source text. The original structure, imagery, references, quotations, names, dates and terminology have been preserved as closely as possible. No external text has been added. Spelling in names appearing in the source has not been silently corrected.