

Incandescences – Phosphorescences

Guitemie Maldonado

For French-speaking readers, the English term ‘murmur’ is even more evocative than its French equivalent: because it is formed by the strict duplication of one and the same syllable, and because—give or take an accent—a noun and an adjective seem to blend in it. And so the question arises: can a wall (French *mur*) be mature, or ripe (French *mûr*)? And if so, is this when it fills the space of the gaze, to the point of saturating it? When it is made of inflated bags of who knows what? When, between these bags, young shoots climb and slither, their green for a while permitting the blood red of the stitches enclosing them to be forgotten? When, by dint of freezing it, the white of the canvas turns into green or when ghostly faces seem to be drawn there, as if murmurs were escaping? The 2014 diptych titled *Murmur* faces us with such questions, personal and open alike, grappling too with the contemporary world, from over-production to food crises, from wars to the toughening of borders; it dialogues, through the number it applies and the interpretation of marks as heads, with *In A Brown Study*, an archival fragment, taken from the endless inventory of particular—and yet so similar—figures. The colour range, and the allusion to memory and history might call to mind the world of an artist like Luc Tuymans or Michaël Borremans, whose strangeness is undeniably shared by the painting of Xie Lei. The set of references, too, invariably in allusive mode and drawing from a broad spectrum: art history, literature, film. This latter field seems especially significant here, and we might think of François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451* in front of *Purified Of Enjoyment*, or Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* in front of *About The World We Live In* and *Language Of Feelings*. But, just as much as fantasy films and films of anticipation, this language of feelings might refer to the history of the Tower of Babel, just as *Leading* calls to mind *The Blind Leading the Blind*, painted by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, and John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia*. Yet the reference is never direct or explicit, and even less exclusive: suggested at the very most, it represents one of the possibilities of painting, a landmark or a point of entry in the work which, for all that, does not exhaust its sense therein.

For it is hallmarked, above all, by the fluidity of the paint, its intensity mixed with transparency and underpinned by amazingly bright colours, by a form of

untranquillity, one might even be tempted to say, to such an extent does nothing in it seem to be drawn up once and for all. The aquatic element is ubiquitous: depicted at times by colour, at others by concentric circles and whirlpools, it contains slow, supple movements, as if sliding in suspension. But even more so than the image of water, it is perhaps the image of fire and conflagration that strikes people looking at this painting, be it represented as in *Touching and Unseen*, produced in 2013, as well as in *Purified Of Enjoyment*, produced in 2014, or evoked by the treatment of the colours and the light. The contrasts are in fact invariably acknowledged: violent flashes rending the darkness (*Stream Of Consciousness*), or timid shadows floating in a whirlpool of intense colours (*About The World We Live In*). The scenes depicted here are for the most part nocturnal in their tonality, and yet they are dazzling, like that “obscure clarity that falls from the stars” mentioned in *Le Cid*, which has become a standard example of the oxymoron, that figure of speech which, when transposed into painting, goes well with the pictures of Xie Lei. At once disconcerting and seductive, they arouse that “hypnotized observation”¹ which Gaston Bachelard made the distinctive feature of the observation of fire. And this whether the chromatic dominant is hot or cold. Adjectives which here, incidentally, take on their full sense, to such an extent do we experience, in looking at them, the form of “thermic sympathy”² that the philosopher describes: colour, light and temperature all come across as inseparable in these orange, pink, blue and purple incandescences. Caught in circular configurations, they associate radiance and inwardness, like fire which “gives dreaming man the lesson of a depth that has a future”³ and is pure “at its limit, at the tip of the flame, where colour makes way for an almost invisible vibration”.⁴ It is on such limits that these paintings show themselves, those which separate shadow from light, and matter from evanescence. Not that they strive to dislocate them, because, quite to the contrary, they explore their contact zones, just like that “point of fire”—the temperature at which matter ignites—“which marks a substance the way the split second of love marks a life”.⁵ Which also marks it in the way it distinguishes it from others and makes it possible to identify it at the very moment of its dissipation, just as the colour of flames indicates their temperature. Auguste Rodin had this to say about it: “Everything is just the limit of the flame to which it owes its existence”.⁶ It is obviously at the limit that this latter vanishes, as fire merges in colour to create this phosphorescent animation which permeates the pictures: “That which fire has illuminated”, writes Bachelard,

“keeps an unerasable colour. That which fire has addressed, loved, adored, has gained memories and lost innocence.”⁷

1 Gaston Bachelard, *La psychanalyse du feu*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Folio, 2002, p. 14.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

6 Auguste Rodin quoted by Max Scheler, *ibid.*, p. 100.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 102.