

«it really is a question of seduction
we're looking at all the solutions »¹

All works of art involve seduction, all artistic endeavours try to capture one's attention and, in order to do so, charm those they address. To those who would have us believe that the most rigorous and innovative art escapes this widespread undertaking, it will be answered that seduction can be paradoxical, that it can have to do with a need for distinction (well before Bourdieu, since La Bruyere at least, we in fact know that it is so as *to distinguish themselves* that certain social and cultural groups display tastes marked by a rejection of feeling, as well as by the pre-eminence of things intelligible and rare). The peculiarity of Emmanuelle Villard's paintings lies in their displaying their intention to seduce, playing with common taste without affecting any respectable elitism. In short, in being openly decorative (providing one can agree just what it is this adjective denotes).

Their first quality is their accessibility: far from imposing themselves from on high, like haughty, monumental objects, they invite the eye. They also invite touch, even if only the eye can actually embrace them. They thus display more than a tactile quality, in the sense that painting here acquires the properties of sculpture. You would like to touch them, to hold them in your hands, to stroke their surface - and this desire is constantly kept intact by the impossibility of satisfying it, as soon as they are hung on the wall. For many of them, the suggestion of taste can be added to these two senses: one series conjures up long ribbons of marshmallow, another conjures up packets of round, multicoloured sweets, yet another suggests smooth jam pastes or coloured-sugar icings, in such a way as to displace the modernist theory of diverse correspondences and synaesthesia.²

As a result, the traditional metaphor of painting as cookery, based on pictorial recipes, is infused with new life. The artist herself comments: «The material is cooked, manipulated, tamed. Measuring, stirring, pouring: baking? [...] A recipe trying to find itself, the making of an alchemist's filter: something to attract (the eye).»³ Because the only point of a recipe is to bring pleasure to whoever is tasting it, feeding him at the same time (if it is a question of good cooking, we know that feeding-value is a plus, and we don't even pay attention to this, it is pleasure that counts). As with cakes, one should be able to work out the ingredients and methods used, but these are not revealed when the painting is presented. A history of gestures and procedures cannot really be read into it. The basis of Emmanuelle Villard's painting, however, is certainly procedural. She herself maintains that, from the choice of «certain tools (pots, syringes, pipettes etc.), [...] specific manipulations and gestures flow.»⁴ In accordance with a particular desire to set at a distance (a paradoxical distancing, as we have seen for the viewer, and as we shall see for the artist), the painting is the result of handling that leaves the materials a somewhat free reign. This aspect has been sufficiently touched upon by Frank Lamy for me to dwell on it any longer: «To get involved in this gesture and take it as an object. For itself, almost independently of what it will yield. To become absorbed in this gesture and make it quasi-autonomous, without content other than itself. For it to signify nothing, outside of its own appearance. Which does not in the least interfere with the sense of rising to the surface, coming out. But elsewhere perhaps.»⁵

I would like to emphasise just how much the viewer's pleasure here is dependent upon that of the artist's: she abandons the processes when she knows all the results in advance (to refuse to know them all would be to blind oneself, in the almost literal sense of the term, and it is difficult to see what this could have to do with pleasure). It is in this way, at first, that, since 1994 at least, one series has followed another, intertwining, each one presenting the same type of images, since each one is the result of the same type of handling. As with Bernard Frize's work, or Miquel Mont's (but with very different implications), everything is

useful in this particular cookery: since 1998, a whole series, the «ribbons», was made with paint-leftovers deposited by other series, carefully collected in pots (at this point, a less tasty metaphor springs to mind, that of a sort of slurry or artistic, liquid manure with known fertility powers). Likewise, progressive changes in handling lead to the transition from one series to another. In this way, the series of «ocellated» paintings, painted since 1999, was practically born from paintings of 1998 with discs or semi-rectangles of small, monochrome spots - by the enlargement and thickening of paint deposits, the disappearance of the background and the superposition of several colours one upon the other.

I have said that the distance established by this faith in handling⁶ was just as paradoxical for the artist as for the viewer. This is because the painting is born of a necessary, physical relationship with its creator. Formats are determined by the possibility of practical handling: their four corners must be reached in a single gesture, which limits their size. It is no longer a question, as it was for the upholders of an expressionist action painting, of losing oneself in the painting (in order to let the subconscious speak up?), but rather of putting the work at the right distance: where the artist can embrace the whole with her eye and arms, where she can «be in the act of painting, yet controlling it. To be both seduced and dominating.»⁷. This is why these paintings, obviously painted lying flat, are not painted on the ground. How otherwise could the paint be allowed to relax, spread itself out, without gravity forcing it to go in just one direction, sometimes to the point of going over the edges of the stretcher even? They remain physically dominated: the canvas is placed on a table or a trestle (Mondrian did the same in his Parisian or New York studios, but playing the engineer, which is very far from Emmanuelle Villard's attitude) and the artist can walk around them. Little by little, with sparing gestures (why tire yourself out turning around, when, with your arm, leaning over, it is possible to reach the opposite corner?), one side is privileged. This will become the bottom of the painting, which thus passes from isomorphy to a relationship with verticality, without this having been imposed beforehand on the painting.

Perhaps, for the most part, this tension between isomorphy and verticality explains the viewer's feeling of both distance and closeness. It is this that enables optical desire and the other, more immediate senses to be equally appealed to. Furthermore, this is intensified by the way in which Emmanuelle Villard's works belong to the world in which the viewer is plunged - at least as images, since, as paintings on a stretcher, they assert their specificity and autonomy.⁸ For them, it is not a question of anticipating a world to come or making discoveries above and beyond appearances, but of playing, by the profusion of allusions⁹, with all the sensations that are a part of ordinary life. In the past, until 1996 at least, the artist chose to extract signs directly from reality in order to establish this continuity: in a series of 24 small paintings, from 1995 to 1996, Futura 2000 style graffiti was superposed on tartan motifs, because, according to her (at the time), «one of the solutions for escaping formalism is to introduce elements from reality into the artistic field»¹⁰. Today - and for several years now - this direct introduction of reality would of course be regarded as losing the right distance and taken as a form of pressing command, directed at the viewer (here's what you *have* to see, don't let yourself go). Significantly, the tartan patterns of the series I have just mentioned can be found again in 1998, isolated, like fabric motifs (samples of kilts or handkerchiefs?), - duplications of reality that the paint literally «de-figures» (and «de-realises») by subsiding to the point of creating a sort of pleated pocket. But because, there again, there was too great an insistence on a particular motif - the grid¹¹ -, with numerous obvious connotations in the history of abstraction, because the most immediate visual association was that of a piece of clothing that only a few fetishists with a nostalgia for schoolgirls' uniforms could find seductive (unless it was a kitchen tea-towel, even less attractive), this motif was replaced in 2001 (after several more modernist avatars) by a diagonal weft of filaments evoking netting or

mantillas - not those that can be seen on glossy photographs but rather those to be observed when dressings have fallen out, stitches have run or slackened.

These few examples suggest to just what extent Emmanuelle Villard's paintings flirt with kitsch: their motifs are those found on lighters placed on the tables of tourist restaurants by people bearing signs warning that they are «deaf since birth», those made by decorative lamps with retro-futuristic effects. From this point of view, they do not always escape the type of nostalgic fascination for the seventies which equally marks fashion and the art of numerous artists today (from Jorge Pardo to Jim Isserman or Heidi Wood, to take some very different examples). But this is only the reverse side - luckily rare - of their refusal of all elitism. Their desire for seduction is so on the surface that they play, one could say naturally, with a formal repertoire, that of the vulgarity of drawing and colour (in the way T. J. Clark was able to show that what makes Pollock's greatness in post-war American democratic society is precisely his vulgarity¹²). It is their duty to appear pleasant, as elements of affordable furniture can be: they must, in some way, become elements of furniture, but with an added something. Like a piece of furniture, they must first of all seduce as a whole, but they also immediately attract attention to their components - and in that they remain paintings. It has been said they could be produced according to much the same methods as «other activities such as knitting, crochet, which make themselves almost in spite of oneself, which occupy and liberate at the same time»¹³, and, undoubtedly, one day, they will be the object of some feminist interpretation. It seems to me just as important at least to emphasise that they are apprehended simultaneously in both a distracted and a concentrated manner: at first, you take them simply for objects furnishing the visual field, then you want to seize hold of them in every possible way.¹⁴ They thus fall fully within the aesthetics of the decorative. I take pleasure here in recalling Matisse's interpretation of this aesthetic category: «It is a question of channelling the viewer's mind in such a way that he uses the painting as a prop but is able to think about something else other than the particular object you wanted to paint: holding his attention without numbing his mind; leading him to feel the quality of feeling you wanted to express.»¹⁵ An interpretation which could be completed by another statement made by the same artist: «One walks in front of a mosaic as one walks in front of a chair.»¹⁶

In Emmanuelle Villard's case, however, this decorative functioning opens out onto a potential harnessing of the senses. And nothing obliges one to think that the result of this harnessing is always pleasant, so much does it depend on the individual experiences of each viewer. You will like what you see, which reminds you of big eyes (if you take pleasure in the fascination of eyes), or you will find them terrifying (if you are the type for whom *Die Tausend Augen des Dr Mabuse* quickly turns into *Le diabolique Docteur Mabuse*). You will want to touch what you see, which reminds you of swollen skin, yet another one will recoil in front of blisters or what will seem like goosepimples. In this way, each of Emmanuelle Villard's paintings is like Snow White waiting for Prince Charming's kiss (the viewer's in this case): asleep, a thing amongst things in an environment, it remains ready to open itself to whosoever is seduced by it, and to gently lead him there where his desires take him - a place impossible to name with precision and certainty.

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¹ Michel Cloup / Arnaud Michniak, «Une histoire de séduction», *Diabologum* #3, Lithium Records, 1996, 0:43-0:47.

²The obvious resemblance to sweets of some of Emmanuelle Villard's paintings explains why they were associated with those of Dominique Figarella and other artists in an exhibition baptised *Sweet* (galerie Evelyne Canus, Paris, September 2000). As for synaesthesia of the gustatory sense, it is difficult to understand why we had to wait until the turn of the XXI century to see it appear in the field of abstraction, which has shown itself historically more sensitive to musical lures. A question of democratic destination, no doubt.

³Emmanuelle Villard, in exhibition catalogue *Usage*, London, Mellow Birds, 2000, n.p.

⁴*ibid.*

⁵Frank Lamy, in exhibition catalogue *AEntre deux*, Paris, Galerie Art & Patrimoine, 1998, p.6.

⁶Faith, the result of which is the necessity of sacrificing a significant number of paintings – quite simply ruined.

⁷Emmanuelle Villard, in exhibition catalogue *Usage*, *op. cit.*.

⁸I doubt that the term *image* is adequate here because it refers not only to the iconography but also to a group of perceptive suggestions.

⁹«Against all formalism, the picture summons allusion.» (Emmanuelle Villard, *ibid.*)

¹⁰Emmanuelle Villard, «Entretien entre Emmanuelle Villard et Catherine Macchi», in exhibition catalogue *Emmanuelle Villard*, Nice, Villa Arson, 1996, n.p.

¹¹On the history of the grid in abstraction and the multiplicity of its semantic associations, I take the liberty of referring the reader to my essay «Beyond the Grid», in exhibition catalogue *Abstraction/Abstractions : Géométries provisoires*, Saint Etienne, Musée d'art moderne, 1996.

¹²Cf. T. J. Clark, «In Defense of Abstract Expressionism», *Farewell to an Idea*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1999, p.371-403.

¹³Frank Lamy, in exhibition catalogue *AEntre deux*, *op. cit.*.

¹⁴The artist's photographs where coloured pastilles and translucent discs are scattered on a transparent plaque also render this possibility of double apprehension perceptible, in particular because they recall those «boxes of buttons» or those first kaleidoscopes parents give to their small children to keep them occupied.

¹⁵Henri Matisse, «Réponses pour un entretien avec Georges Duthuit [avant 1929]», in Georges Duthuit, *Ecrits sur Matisse*, Rémi Labrusse ed., Paris, énsb-a, 1992, p.294.

¹⁶Henri Matisse, cited by Georges Duthuit in a letter to the former dated 2 September 1925, *ibid.*, p.215.