

## **Emmanuelle Villard: painting skin-deep**

Larys Frogier

Audacity:

- painting today
- working on the sense(s) - *s\_ma/soma* - through abstract art
- assuming a share of femininity within a pictorial history governed by a scopic male structure.

The touching part of Emmanuelle Villard's work lies in its double invitation: an admission to the trials and aesthetic jubilation of painting, and, at the same time, the opening up of abstract painting to contemporary problematics - image consumption, the body, intimacy, femininity... Whilst many contemporary artists are plunging themselves into photography and video, tending towards intimate exhibitionism or spectacular representation of the body, Emmanuelle Villard prefers to weave the surface of her canvas with possible ornaments or physical irregularities, questioning the validity of painting today, stimulating feminine evolution in life and artistic creation.

If Emmanuelle Villard's paintings seem exuberant and are undeniably generous, the artist works hard behind the scenes in the solitude of her studio. It takes time to create and think painting. In the studio, a table has replaced the easel. It is not however a question of radical horizontality occupying the ground, but rather of a device whereby the painter, her body bent over the table and the canvas, has a limited, sometimes restricting, surface at her disposal, where she can perform meticulous gestures and an often repetitive motif. This particular body posture is not anecdotal. It may indeed have something in common with that of a seamstress involved in some laborious task, but, in any case, it fully participates in determining the pictorial form.

The painter's inventiveness appears at the heart of the pictorial process, that's to say, in the «how it's done»: careful selection of colours, quasi-culinary mixture of paints and resins, recovery of paint-leftovers, declination of precise movements, spreading, tracing or dripping the paint onto the canvas, anticipation and discovery of the effects of the paint as it dries - coagulation, shifting, cracks, thickening.

Description alone of how the work is created, however, is not enough. Regarding Robert Ryman's critical comments on painting, Yve-Alain Bois pointed out: «As in the past, the hunt for sources in literary studies, or the search for the «true» motif in History of Art (...),

the account of the process establishes a primary meaning, an ultimate, founding referent, and blocks the chain of interpretation.»<sup>1</sup> Like Ryman's white paintings, Emmanuelle Villard's multicoloured paintings thoroughly and rigorously explore painting's infinite possibilities. They may indeed catch the art critic out who, wishing to perform a legitimate but systematic decoding of «how it's done», in fact turns the process into the sole causality of the painting's existence.

In order to find the beginnings of a way out of this impasse on process, let's note, at this point, that the artist is neither trying to dominate her subject, nor control the materials. Great precision is certainly required throughout the development of the work, but so also is acceptance, together with an opening for possible reactions and transformations of pictorial matter and for doubts that permit the paint a certain *laissez-faire*, allowing the work to take shape. Overpainting...

On the other hand, the painter's gestures and the paint's possible torments have nothing to do with the heroic affirmation of an expressive body language. Emmanuelle Villard forestalls all painter's narcissistic pathos, favouring minimal gestures, finicky, obsessional and repetitive. Gilles Deleuze has shown perfectly how repetition can constitute an act of resistance to a logic of narrative and image consumption<sup>2</sup>. Emmanuelle Villard repeats, on the same and on different canvases, the same gestures and the same motif. Repetition is carried out by juxtaposition, placing side by side, but also by superposition, covering, overflowing, or again, drawing lines. Repetition does not create identical paintings but engenders differences by tracing zones and streams of perceptive intensities.

No one can escape the seduction in Emmanuelle Villard's work. Her paintings, flashy and colourful, produce a shop-window effect, like sweetshop or clothes shop windows or stalls at a fair, which incidentally the artist enjoys photographing. Unless it is a case of painting as one puts on make-up, of considering paint as a surface device and ornament. Or again, of consuming the paintings as one would consume seemingly appetising cakes: if our eye was a tongue, we would often find Emmanuelle Villard's paintings a little too sweet. Where therefore does this sickly sweet taste that remains in our eyes come from?

Speaking of seduction, we cannot avoid the question of femininity in Emmanuelle Villard's work. In fact, if one agrees that her painting seduces by its ornaments and its shimmering colours, one might be tempted to declare that, in that, it is feminine. Such an interpretation however is extremely reductive, insulting even, since it only reproduces a fetishist vision of the works and encloses femininity within the stereotype of a beautiful object to be admired.

The femininity assumed in Emmanuelle Villard's work is never dupe to its power of seduction. Her painting is seductive in that it is deceitful. It would first deceive itself, intentionally, as if to dismiss any enclosure of painting within the fascination of its sole

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<sup>1</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, «Le tact de Ryman», in cat. *Robert Ryman*, Paris : Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981, p.11.

autonomy and creation process. The rendering of the painting with its multicoloured, flashy surface comes almost as if to make the repetitive gestures and its rigorous, laborious creation vanish. Colour as a travesty or masquerade of the painting's elaboration process.

Fundamentally, Emmanuelle Villard's painting comes to deceive the viewer's eye, which is instantly caught and absorbed by the conjugation of colours. But the painting later reveals that this surface effect is really carnal. The work's seductive effects are in fact metaphors for skin, declined and stratified in different states: certain paintings, like the «pies», bring to mind skin that has been overly made-up, whilst the «goosepimple» series inevitably evokes damaged and blistered skin, or again, other paintings, like the «netting» series, blur the effects of skin squeezed into stockings or surgical gauze.

One begins to see then how such paintings maintain an essential link with skin, not as a simple surface or envelope, but as a real place of exchange, transformation and contact. Between the paint pot and the epidermal deposit of paint on canvas, between matter and pictorial form, carnal interstices develop that permit the rubbing of one matter against another, the shifting of one form towards another, the moving of one painting towards another, the passage from external to internal, interchangeable habitation of identity envelopes. These however are only the effects of paint with no representational claims. But this anatomical non-representation leads to infinite tussles, mixing suppleness, density, fragility, consistency and the emergence of shapeless matter.

If indeed it were necessary to find a historical reference, there is no need to look to historical figures in painting. I am thinking in particular of one of Hannah Wilke's works, *Starification Object Series (SOS)* - 1974-1982 - which is a panel of ten photographs where the artist can be seen, stripped to the waist, adopting different poses and masquerades of femininity (femme fatale, woman-child, prostitute...). Except that Hannah Wilke's face and body are dotted with small beads of coloured rubber, like jewels or pustules, worked and modelled so as to suggest the lips of female sex organs. This work from the seventies was audacious in that it took the opposite stance to a feminist militancy, hostile to all representation of femininity, and turned feminine seduction around into a vehicle for social criticism rather than a process of male fetishisation of the female body. This turnaround was made possible by stratification and layering in the representation of the female body: body-matter, masculine/feminine clothing, the naked bust, the pose, rubber beads, the symbol of the female sex organs, photographic images in series<sup>3</sup>.

With Emmanuelle Villard's painting, it is no longer necessarily a question of representing a feminine/feminist body, but rather of playing, over the entire surface of the canvas, with the effects of strata and matter, echoing female flesh. Femininity asserted in her work is therefore a strategy of infiltration into painting and its history, as well as an effective and subversive strategy for seducing the eye. It is not simply a question of looking

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *R\_p\_tition et diff\_rence*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> For a study of Hannah Wilke's work see Amelia Jones, «The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art», in *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

pretty and flashy, but of repeating and exploring the attributes of a supposedly feminine genre, right to the end. To such a degree that this repetition has come to undo a double myth: that of femininity as a simple, external envelope and that of painting as a single, flat surface; the function of these two myths being to produce a fetish intended strictly for scopic pleasure. Femininity at play in Emmanuelle Villard's work arises out of its many layers, its composition in thick strata, subtle links, artificial films, glitter, glossy colours. It is these layers that permit cracks, shifting of matter and meaning. Feminine evolution in painting is, definitively, this act of diverting and transforming the eye.