

**Emmanuelle VILLARD**  
***Acid reminiscences of abstract painting***

The surplus of earlier paintings, some mixture of acrylic resins with a velvety texture and sparkling colours that is, lies in glass jars. *Positively* pop, let's say. It is not a case here of abandoning a substance considered past its use-by date but, rather, on the contrary, of preserving it in a safe place in view of its potentially reusable qualities: one must wait. Use of gesture and appropriation of material constitute the basic methods of the pictorial act in Emmanuelle Villard's practice and come into being through a process that springs from a specific temporality. Thus, in 1998, spreading the contents of these jars onto a horizontally placed canvas enabled her to play out these two artistic points once again in a way that integrates the dimension of memory. In fact, it is a case of re-using the leftovers. Recharging material that already bears the mark of the past proceeds from an artistic attitude that belongs to the sphere of memory. The result is several paintings in a classical format (N° 105-23, 114 x 146 cm) that together make up series 105, also known, in the studio, as the «ribbons series». The canvas reveals the process correlative to its creation and evolution in time. Several tight-looped convolutions unfold one after the other over the entire surface of the painting and reveal a crisscross of colours that resemble very tempting boiled sweets. An artistic process such as this has something to do with kitsch *drip* painting relieved of the weight of all heroism and pathos. Emmanuelle Villard thus places her work in the field of non-geometrical abstraction, showing her love of paint-runs, of seducing the material and of irreverent gestures. It's a matter of finding just the right attitude capable of grasping the pictorial act in a way that is bold, playful, enticing even, even though, henceforth, abstraction is a totally historical genre, whose possibilities in the present it is nevertheless fitting to examine. The process, conceived in 1998 for the few paintings in series 105, was taken up again in 2002 but in a more intimist way since the new canvas format (14 x 18 cm) requires concentration and precision in the application of repetitive gestures: pouring, leaving to spread, controlling paint-runs. The circumvolutions of the material lie next to one another then, superposed even, and the long drying time required allows the various resins to interact with one another while excess material stabilises around the edges of the stretcher. A surplus doomed to sink into so-called oblivion may, once again, gain an additional life through a felicitous process of sedimentation. Series 105 is thus completed by a further set of paintings — dense conglomerates of interlacing with predominant mauve and brown colourings, giving us a glimpse, here and

there, of a few dashes of more acid colours. Ever since her first solo exhibition, in 1996, at the Villa Arson, Emmanuelle Villard has been revealing her penchant for processes integrating reminiscence. She thus covers «scripts», produced on the canvas earlier, with a thick, uniform layer of paint, until they disappear. Then, guided by the memory of the first traces, she makes fresh marks with a paintbrush soaked in varnish. «When the varnish dries, a chemical reaction occurs and the scripts rise up towards the marks»<sup>1</sup>. All her work is structured by creation that evokes the dimension of loss. Thus, for the famous series 106 begun in 1999, blobs of bright colours are deposited on the canvas — always placed horizontally — using a large pipette in a way that both aligns and superposes. Such abundance inevitably causes the material to sag but the colours retain their autonomy throughout the time they take to dry due to the specific density of the mixture. A surplus spills over onto the work table and equally over the edges of the stretcher; a little of the paint leaves the primary support. In the end, therefore, the work exists through what remains, in a stratified and condensed form. The same goes for series 66 (2001-2003) where a grid painted on a monochrome background loses its initial geometrical structure under the various weights of the material and chemical reactions inherent in the mixture, giving way to tears and holes. Moreover, since this is not a case of abandoning leftovers to their sad fate, why not demand the re-use of paintings that didn't work out, temporarily forgotten in a corner of the studio<sup>2</sup>. They might just as well be freed of their henceforth useless stretcher then covered with a thin layer of uniform colour, nice and tonic, vermilion, bright mauve, and placed in the present once more. The result is monochromes with cheerfully sagging canvases (series 11, 2002-2003) or fairly bloated (series 10, 2002-2003) that make a point of honour of not concealing their past adventures and showing contempt for any metaphysical space deemed henceforth obsolete. The act of covering, the basis of Emmanuelle Villard's pictorial practice, uses, in turn, paint-runs, grids and/or monochromes, forms belonging to an artistic past that is already used-up. Duly noted. Different temporalities — moments of oblivion, remembrance and the present — converge just as the painting succeeds in conquering its existence, that is to say, when it is hung on the wall. On this subject, the artist states:

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<sup>1</sup> « Entretien entre Emmanuelle Villard et Catherine Macchi », in cat. *emmanuelle villard*, Villa Arson, Nice, 1996, n.p.

<sup>2</sup> A conversation between Emmanuelle Villard and Yannick Vigouroux, «La cuisine picturale», website [www.exporevue.com](http://www.exporevue.com), 2001, n. p. «What interests me also, is to see how, in the «compulsion of repetition», there will always be some sort of leftovers that will lead me each time to the next painting». There is no hard copy publication of this conversation.

*I always leave the material a great deal of freedom. It is left to chance, not controlled by me in any way. Moreover, the painting is only visible to me once it is completely dry. A week can go by between its creation — I work horizontally— and the moment it is hung on the wall, when I will really look at it. It is then that I validate the painting or not. Not everything is good, a lot goes in the bin<sup>3</sup>.*

Furthermore, it should be noted that, in practice, the series that make up this work do not develop according to a linear chronology but adopt a temporal, rhizome-like model. Indeed, past, present and future do not combine here in a traditional way that would tend to justify their successive modes of existence by a principle of rupture and causality. The artistic attitude adopted by Emmanuelle Villard shows that the pictorial act in her work cannot exist in the sphere of the present without being aware of the risk of its loss, which must somehow be countered. In fact, we are left wondering as to the future. The proclamation of a memory to be seized endows this work with an interesting and specific temporal order governed by stratification, fluidity and openings.

It would appear that Emmanuelle Villard's work is in fact only remotely related to what was called, at the beginning of the eighties, post-abstraction<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, in practice, with regards to this post-historical abstraction, the artist's attitude is one of distance thus neutralising the expression of the *I*. The paintings are moreover so many smooth, anonymous and taut surfaces. This art of detachment, heir to Pop art and the ready-made, marks abstraction as an historical genre through an ensemble of designations that endow the works with an iconic charge. Emmanuelle Villard's works are not governed by a principle of indifference and do not set the viewer face to face with cold surfaces that would keep him at bay. On the contrary, his optical and haptic instincts, to use Alois Riegl's terms, are greatly solicited. In this, this artist's attitude distances itself, in practice, from those defended by Peter Halley, John Armleder, or Bernard Frize, amongst others.

The *I* is once again vested in Emmanuelle Villard's practice in a form that is relieved of all expressionism, enabling her to escape a certain contemporary neo-lyricism. The latent period required for the work to dry and during which it comes definitively into being represents in fact the *laisser-faire* stage: «From the moment the paint is deposited, with no overpainting possible, the painting becomes an autonomous body<sup>5</sup>».

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, n. p.

<sup>4</sup> On this question, see the special reports in *Ligeia* magazine devoted to «Nouvelles abstractions» (*Ligeia*, n<sup>os</sup> 37-38-39-40, October 2001 / June 2002, p. 25-232).

<sup>5</sup> A conversation between Emmanuelle Villard and Claire Le Restif, «Conversation», in cat. *Emmanuelle Villard*, La Criée, Rennes, 2002, p. 21.

Furthermore, the omnipresence of the curve, the result of a specific gesture in her intimist works, is to be taken as a measure of the artist's body, a woman's body, proud of its sensuality. This corporeity is reinforced by the positive presence of the material, its density and sparkle that preclude the attribution of a purely iconic dimension to the work. Emmanuelle Villard's practice is no more concerned with the reification of the gesture as canonised by modernism. Indeed, if series 105 does take us back to the famous *Brushstroke Paintings* by Lichtenstein, this is by no means a referent integrated into the production process beforehand. Moreover, any such referent belonging to Great Modernist Painting would be sought in vain in series 106. The artist does not seek to tick off icons of the past in a voluntarist mode and by doing so also avoid a linear, progressive reading of the history of abstraction. But the act of covering, the basis of her work, inasmuch as it adopts the paint-run, the grid, the monochrome, and does so in a desacralised way, inevitably carries with it a memory of forms resulting from these processes. Emmanuelle Villard, in her practice, does not in fact adopt a borrowing mode but one of reminiscence rather. Consequently, her work evokes a collective memory of abstraction together with all the resulting subjective dimension. Memory, or what remains of the past at a given moment in the present. The viewer may take his time luxuriating in his perceptive and analytical reception of the artist's work. This state of mind gives Emmanuelle Villard a great deal of freedom in her practice, all the more so since dogmas are banished. Modernism, formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, not one of these precepts drives her pictorial production:

*I belong to a category of young painters, who cannot and do not want to think any more in terms of dogmas. [...] I, myself, am incapable of dogmatising my painting. What interests me is the way in which desire circulates, the way the eye circulates*<sup>6</sup>.

It is a case of holding on to abstract painting so it does not sink into the sphere of oblivion since it may still today provide us with information as to our presence in the world.

«Visual objects»<sup>7</sup>: it is tempting to follow the artist in this designation adopted with regard to her work in 2002. If the paintings made since the mid-nineties already possess a positive materiality, from 2002 on they flirt more particularly with three-dimensional space, specifically series 10 and 11. They begin to come away from the wall. The recent series of balls (2004) confirms this total conquest of real space. The paint-run is once again adopted as an act of covering and

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<sup>6</sup> A conversation between Emmanuelle Villard and Claire Le Restif, «Sub rosa... hollala !», in cat. *Comment s'appelle la partie immergée de l'iceberg ?*, La Maison populaire, Montreuil, p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131. «I now accept this term of «visual objects». I would have difficulty in calling them paintings now, since I no longer see them as such.»

integrates the dimension of loss. Lacquer spread on polystyrene balls of varied diameters creates an effect of glazing. These objects are then left to drain and dry. In the end, they retain only a thin film of the material with traces of paint-runs. One or more bumps visible on the lower parts of the balls testify as to the presence of what remains and the corporeity inherent in this work. Shown hanging from the ceiling at the artist's most recent solo exhibition (Le Credac, 2004), these works explicitly assert a decorative dimension (in the broad sense of the term) that has incidentally characterised the artist's work ever since her early pieces<sup>8</sup>. Cushions, pillows, Chinese lanterns, luminous globes, etc., there is no end of metaphors to describe the works of the three series mentioned. Moreover, the series of balls prevents this work from being too hurriedly classified as Neo-Pop, if only because of their colours that rather evoke those of the painted cupolas of the Renaissance that, seen with one's head tilted back, often only allow abstract forms to be perceived; these balls are moreover simply very humble secular remnants of the cupolas. The several kitsch *Specific Objects* made since 2002 confirm the artist's resistance as to the exploration of abstract painting in her practice. It is significant to note that Donald Judd defended precisely this concept of Specific Objects at a time when abstract painting seemed to him to have exhausted itself from the point of view of its past forms. Emmanuelle Villard's visual objects have a precious character also that can be felt in the attention given to their creation, intimate format and power to seduce. *Agalmata*: with the title of her recent solo exhibition, the artist validates this quality of precious objects for the whole of her work. The term *agalma* in fact implies the notion of value in its linguistic sense. In anthropological terms, the philosopher and Hellenist, Louis Gernet, studied the considerable role of *agalмата* (a term given to the magnificently generous, painted statuettes offered to the gods) throughout the genesis of the elaboration of coins in the days of Ancient Greece<sup>9</sup>. If Lacanian psychoanalysis has bestowed particular semantics upon the term *agalмата* that have more to do with metaphor and myth than with thinking founded on historical facts, it is nevertheless fitting, however pertinent, not to omit the other correlative determinants of this term so its richness may be fully appreciated. From an historiographical point of view, indeed, objects that were exchanged — tripods, vases, gems — and also possessed protective properties have equally been called *agalмата* over the years. Money is the essential tool of consumption in these days of capitalism. Emmanuelle Villard's pictorial

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<sup>8</sup> On this subject see Eric de Chasse's text, «It really is a question of seduction we're looking at all the solutions», in cat. *Emmanuelle Villard, La Criée*, op. cit., p. 35-38.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Gernet, trans. John Hamilton and Blaise Nagy, «The Mythical Idea of Value in Greece», in *Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1982, p. 73-111.

work is accompanied moreover by photographic work through which she attempts to grasp a few fragments of reality: «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»<sup>10</sup>. It is a matter of listing the possibilities of abstraction whilst taking note of the great spectacle offered by that particular condition of today's societies where everything is available for consumption. But allowing oneself to be taken in by this show of seduction should not cause one to forget however that Emmanuelle Villard's joyful and generous masquerade also aims at testing the degree of resistance of the pictorial act as compared with the tempting superabundance of consumer goods. Precious objects, visual objects on the fringes of painting and sculpture, magnificent objects of desire, ambivalent objects provoking surface seduction and more secret turmoil, Emmanuelle Villard's works condense the plural definitions of the term *agalmata*.

Yannick Vigouroux has, I believe, very fortunately noted that Emmanuelle Villard's work may be qualified as kitsch according to Milan Kundera's definition of this term: «Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion»<sup>11</sup>. In fact, it is always a question of evoking what remains, loss, in order to succeed in bringing the work into existence in the present. Claiming memory to succeed in being. This temporal order at the heart of Emmanuelle Villard's work echoes the notion of presentism as defined by the historian François Hartog in his recent work *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*<sup>12</sup>. In these times of crisis, faced as we are with an uncertain future, the mark of which is borne by the present, in order for an event to exist, self-commemoration must indeed be brought to the fore. «The present is thus extended as much towards the future as towards the past»<sup>13</sup>. Emmanuelle Villard's work offers an aesthetic experience through which the possibilities of a contemporary experience of time may be understood. Indeed, the straight line now seems out of place. Why not let oneself be borne along by these coloured curves of time, enjoy their flowing mobility, the playful winding of their interlacing and then sink into a few holes. Beyond doubt, you will not be wasting your time.

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<sup>10</sup> Larys Frogier, «Emmanuelle Villard: painting skin-deep», in cat. Emmanuelle Villard, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> A conversation between Emmanuelle Villard and Yannick Vigouroux, «La cuisine picturale», op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Le Seuil, La Librairie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.