

AGALMATA

These words spring from a completely enigmatic encounter with art objects, from a complex and singular aesthetic experience.

The enigma, by widening the gap between «that means something» and the impossibility of expressing in words what “that” is, has transformed the contingency of the encounter into the necessity of thinking that that which cannot be put into words is of an evasive nature.

In this, the enigma has indicated a path along which it might serve as guide, a key to its interpretation, signalling that the opaque veil it constitutes cannot be separated from what it was intended to hide. The «truth» therefore lies between the lines. This encounter testifies to it.

1. The Machinery of Painting, a topological object of a complex nature.

One enters a completely white, narrow and fairly long room. Black canvases lean between walls and floor the whole length of the room. They are large enough to saturate the space whilst leaving a passageway. If one takes a closer look, they are screens rather than canvases, since they are not painted. The stuff they are made of, matt imitation leather, very opaque and strangely velvety, reminds us of the material in a piece of clothing. It is pulled over stretchers of different sizes, arranged in an apparently random fashion. The layout of these, on both sides of the passageway, is unsymmetrical. On the far wall, in the centre, hangs a very small, very colourful painting, its paint running over the edges of the frame as defined by the stretcher.

It is simple and radical. The contrasts are sharp. The black of the large screens and the white of the room form a classical binary system where multiple colours flicker through a baroque range.

But the coloured multiplicity and the unicity of the black/white binary are inverted when one goes from colour to shape.

The black screens that seemed as one, their colour repeating itself, all turn out to be different in size and their random, asymmetrical arrangement. And where multiple colours jostled one another, flowing over the frame, the single small painting hangs on the wall.

It is also complex and subtle. Tradition and inventiveness blend. The single small painting with multiple colours would have us believe the work belongs to a certain tradition of the pictorial field: painting. But painting that no longer has any limits since it flows over the surface of the frame, taking into account the inventiveness of the painter, who redefines the criteria of this field for herself.

The material of the black objects imitating canvas is an invention-subversion of tradition: painting within painting, just as we talk about «a play within a play» when, on stage, one

plays at playing another play. The screens, like partitions, reveal and conceal that there is nothing to see beyond the painting itself.

The most extraordinary thing about all this is the fact that space is treated as a coloured and formal material. Content and form therefore are caught in a sort of reversibility. The container becomes the contents and, by a *mise en abîme* of the process, we find we are a part of the painting, which is a scene, scenery, but illusion too. We can then grasp the complex dimension of this object, further knowledge of which may be gained through the topological structure of the Möbius strip. Escher has given us multiple representations of it and Lacan used it to highlight similarities between the object of anxiety and that of desire. And even if the object of art is not that of psychoanalysis, their respective constructions may lead to a greater knowledge and understanding of one and the other, inasmuch as art objects represent a particular type of relationship of the subject to desire.

2. Lacanian Topology.

Anxiety is not fear with no object but indeed affect that arises when the object presents itself too closely to the subject. And yet, what must be grasped has to do with the non-specularisable (imageless) nature of this object which, when it appears in the visible field, perturbs perception. The body's specular image, through which the human subject structures his "ego" (Lacan, Mirror Stage), is also the prism through which the structuring of the visible world passes. In fact, the specular image is the principle of consciousness of so-called objective reality. A further step is necessary in order to explain the paradox constituted by the irruption of a non-specularisable object in the visible field.

The object of anxiety may assume many aspects. It is, however, always non-specularisable, has neither front nor back, nor left nor right since the inside is on the outside and the top and bottom are continuous. It cannot therefore be apprehended according to the method of recognition of the mirror image as one's self. In fact, when it suddenly appears in the visible world, the body manifests itself in a totally different way. The body summoned by this type of experience is the body as an organism. It knows no limits for it cannot be reduced to the essence of the mirror that is the matrix of the "ego" where anxiety manifests itself in the form of a signal; while the body, as an organism, does not relate to the construction of the "ego" but to that of the subject for whom the signal is intended. The subject of psychoanalysis is not the conscious subject of philosophy but the subject of the unconscious that structures itself around the void created by the cut produced by the loss of the primordial Other and that Lacan represents by a Möbius strip. Lack springs from this process and, consequently, desire. There is a similarity between the object of anxiety and the object of desire that is made perceptible to us through this model. The subject is linked to the desire of the Other whom, in the absence of all need, he asks for the object he conceals, or who he gets to ask him for it. Desire is always of the Other says Lacan. The objects the subject has to deal with correspond then to this same structure that renders them adequate to replace the void created by this loss. Desire is an enigma that expresses itself as a question. What does the Other want from me?

What does Emmanuelle Villard want when she creates these objects, if not to render palpable, through this structure, the art of catching, controlling the eye, the essence of sight, and the body when that which is shapeless takes shape? Through its very mechanics, the machinery of painting succeeds in revealing that truth has the structure of fiction. In other words, this art shows something other than that which is apparent.

3. Art as fiction tells the truth

Emmanuelle Villard has become a «master of the Art of unveiling whilst veiling and of veiling whilst unveiling» and the works she creates are made of the very material of this veil. On this path of painting, where paint stands in the way, care must be taken not to «step on it» in the very spot where something flows over you.

The wave-like movement created by the asymmetry that divides the space is exaggerated by the swell rising from the random arrangement of the paintings between walls and floor. And if something pulls us forward towards the element hanging on the wall, which is looking at us more than we can see it at first, we are simultaneously dragged towards the floor so much do the black screens attract the light, producing a sort of crushing effect. Next, we should focus on the object hanging on the wall, but the multitude of reds, greens, yellows deposited on the canvas by the painter's gesture, intended to be as discreet as possible, brings the partner «time» onto the stage of this place of fiction. He plays his part with fate, chance and the incongruous and thus makes it impossible to pause at any one scene. The paint, cracked in places, overflowing in others, says nothing more than this: the true position of the being lies in the combined prehension of space and time.

The painter reveals this extraordinary thing to us and gives us the opportunity of experiencing it. Time cannot be controlled; nothing can be done to stop its swift passage. Time cannot be earned. But the poetic experience allows us to regain it. The disquieting strangeness that manifests itself in this aesthetic experience does not depend solely on the fact that the subject is gazed upon from all sides, whereas he himself can only see from one point, but also on the fact that the painting machinery reveals that the whole body takes part in this strange mechanism, where time, which alters form, is presentified.

It is in front of the sort of door that is formed by the small painting, an opening on this reality of fiction, that we can learn that the body needed for this type of experience is not that of an image clothed by beauty, but that of jouissance, whose home it is par excellence. And that painting allows us to inhabit occasionally.

These viewpoints and this organic body revealed by the machinery through the magic of its mechanism show how these objects are born from the very poetic articulation of this painting and how, through them, a part of the jouissance denied by the loss of the primordial object is restored to us.

4. On the other side of the painting

The paths explored by Emmanuelle Villard's work are multiple and occasionally they lead nowhere. There are also clearings, like the machinery of painting, then strange paths, which, far from leading you from one place to another, take you through to the other side of the painting.

The series to which the small painting referred to above belongs has two destinies: one is to appear as we see it and the other is to be the veiled, hidden part of the «object-

painting» that has become something else through the painter's decision. This decision is an act with consequences since a new form of painting is born, from failure.

The painter is not content to turn the canvas over but hides it definitively from view by folding it in on itself: the right side goes over to the wrong side and, through the gesture of folding, becomes the container- package of a rejected object. It will remain unknown to us, such is the artist's wish. The battle with paint is incarnated here since the artist uses her entire body for this metamorphosis of the poetic affirmation of paint.

A monochrome, glossy volume appears from the elision of an image, the reverse side of the canvas does not remain blank and constitutes a new support. It is a canvas that both veils and unveils that, of all those beings of fiction captured in this small object, only a glimmer remains. And in this little shine that reflects the light, there is something of an eye in which we can see ourselves seeing.

5. Agalmata

Emmanuelle Villard's objects evoke others, the *agalmata* that Plato talks about in *The Banquet*, and on which Lacan has shed some light. It is through an allegorical connection that one catches two or three things more on the eroticism of this painting. *Agalma* comes from the Greek and literally means ornament, finery, but its meaning is complex and we shall discuss only one aspect of it here. In *The Banquet*, Alcibiades, in love with Socrates, looks for signs of desire from him and compares him to Silenus, an erudite satyr who taught Dionysus, since, like Socrates, Silenus was ugly but full of wisdom.

However, the comparison does not end there since the word *Silenus* is also related to the function of packaging, casing for the ornaments. The *agalmata* contained in a sort of statuette (a human figure although of divine nature) had the power to seduce the gods by catching their eye. Alcibiades, drunk, sings Socrates praises, revealing to the stupefied guests at the banquet that there are hidden treasures in this man and that they, like the *agalmata*, have the power to seduce. Indeed, Socrates contains something precious called «Knowledge» and, using this, he interprets Alcibiades, revealing to him that the object of his love is elsewhere. He thus unveils for him the illusory nature of desire and Emmanuelle Villard's objects tell us of this also.

There is indeed eroticism in painting that summons love, desire, seduction, the body and jouissance. It is a great classic even that comes in many forms: sophisticated, singular, human, mystic, from the most complex to decipher to the clearest. But the particular charm of this painting lies in the infinitely subtle manner in which the poetic veil is handled, opening doors for us into a dimension that is entirely different from pictorial language. The work acts as scenery, a place for fiction where the scene played is part of the machinery: the subject who allows himself to be seduced by these objects is invited to an unexpected encounter that reveals to him that desire is a defence against the reality of jouissance. I would add that this painting has the effect of feminising anyone who approaches it, giving him a body apt to apprehend it that is not limited to the jouissance of the eye. Here lies the principle risk it engenders: it throws the jouissance of the idiot off centre.